

*Routledge Studies in Literary Translation*

# LITERARY TRANSLATION LIFECYCLES

THE VITAL NETWORKS BEHIND THE CIRCULATION  
OF DUTCH LITERATURE

Edited by

Jack McMartin, Paola Gentile and Elisa Nelissen



# Literary Translation Lifecycles

This collection examines how translated books come into being and circulate across languages, cultures, and book markets.

Using Dutch as a case study of a source language at the margins of the world literary system, the volume sets out an innovative conceptual framework for understanding the making of translated literature, covering discovery, selection, acquisition, translation, production, marketing, and reception. It brings together fifteen accounts of recent literary works translated from Dutch, spanning five genres and fourteen different target languages. This comparative approach, keeping the focus on the same source language at the periphery of the world literary system across examples, allows for a deeper look into the numerous agents involved in the lifecycle of a translated book, including translators, editors, agents, rights managers, marketing staff, and government representatives. Chapters explore the connections between production-side decisions and how translated books were ultimately received in the market, from success stories and breakthroughs to works that faced delays, setbacks, or limited uptake, thereby illustrating a variety of trajectories within the global translation system. Taken together, the collection provides a comprehensive picture of the circulation of Dutch literature in translation and contributes to broader discussions on the translation of less widely studied languages.

This book will appeal to scholars in translation studies and world literature, particularly those interested in literary translation, the sociology of translation, and translation publishing.

**Jack McMartin** is an associate professor of translation studies at KU Leuven, Belgium, and director of the Centre for Translation Studies (CETRA).

**Paola Gentile** is an associate professor of Dutch translation and interpreting at the University of Trieste, Italy.

**Elisa Nelissen** is an FWO postdoctoral fellow in translation studies at KU Leuven, Belgium.

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# Literary Translation Lifecycles

The Vital Networks Behind the Circulation  
of Dutch Literature

Edited by Jack McMartin, Paola Gentile  
and Elisa Nelissen



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# Contributors

**Kim Andringa** holds a PhD in comparative literature from Sorbonne University, where she is currently an associate professor in Dutch studies. Previously to this, she was a tenured associate professor in the translation department at the University of Liège. She is also a literary translator.

**Nasrin Ashrafi** is a postdoctoral researcher affiliated with the Translation and Intercultural Transfer Research Group and the Centre for Reception Studies (CERES) at KU Leuven. Her research interests span the sociology of translation, cultural studies, feminism, and interdisciplinary approaches that extend the boundaries of translation studies.

**Bojana Budimir** is an associate professor in the Dutch studies department at the University of Belgrade, where she teaches translation. Her research focuses on cultural and sociological aspects of translation, technology in translator training, and translation processes. She is also a Dutch–Serbian translator.

**Filip De Ceuster** lectures in Low Countries studies at the University of Sheffield and is specialised in Maurice Gilliams's interwar prose. His current research explores Anglo–Belgian cultural exchanges, focusing on Edward Carpenter. He is editor-in-chief of *Dutch Crossing* and director of the Association for Low Countries Studies in the UK and Ireland.

**Luc van Doorslaer** is a full professor of translation studies at the University of Tartu and is also affiliated to KU Leuven (CETRA) and Stellenbosch University. He is the journal editor of *Translation in Society*. His main research topics are news translation, sociology of translation, imagology and translation, and the institutionalisation of translation studies.

**Wilken Engelbrecht** is a full professor of Dutch at Palacký University in Olomouc. He is also affiliated with the Catholic University of Lublin. His main research interest concerns the reception of Dutch literature in Czech translation, about which he has published extensively.

**Ilse Feinauer** is a professor at Stellenbosch University, where she holds a research chair in Afrikaans language and literature. She is also president of the South African Academy of Science and Arts. Her latest co-edited book is *Translation Flows: Exploring Networks of People, Processes and Products*. She is a founding member of the Association for Translation Studies in Africa (ATSA).

**Carmen Clavero Fernández** is a Dutch–Spanish literary translator specialised in children’s literature and literary non-fiction, and she has collaborated with a range of international publishers. Combining practice and research, she participates in the Connecting Emerging Literary Artists (CELA) network and conducts research into the international circulation of Dutch literature. Her work is informed by an interest in translation as cultural mediation.

**Paola Gentile** is an associate professor of Dutch translation and interpreting at the University of Trieste. She has held research positions or fellowships at KU Leuven, Tartu, Stellenbosch and Leiden. Her research covers translation policy, imagology, and Dutch literature in translation. She is a review editor for *Translation in Society*.

**Ewoud Goethals** studied literature, linguistics, literary studies, and digital humanities and worked as a cataloguer at the Royal Library of Belgium before beginning a PhD at KU Leuven. His doctoral research, part of BELTRANS, explores intra-Belgian literary translations since 1970, focusing on novels and youth literature. He is part of the editorial board of the Flemish literary periodicals *Poëziekrant* and *Flemish Review de la Poëzie*.

**Maud Gonne** is an assistant professor of translation studies (Dutch–French) at the University of Liège. Her research focuses on translation history, cultural transfers, and sociology. She has published widely, including a monograph and several co-edited volumes on these topics. She directs the Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherches en Traduction et en Interprétation and is a board member of CETRA.

**Krisztina Gracza** is a PhD candidate at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, and Utrecht University, and works for the Dutch Foundation for Literature. A Comenius Thesis Prize winner, her research explores translation flows between Hungarian and Dutch. She is also a conservatory-trained cellist.

**Veronika Horácková** is an assistant professor of Dutch studies at Masaryk University in Brno. In addition to working on various academic projects related to the international reception of Dutch literature, she teaches Dutch and works as a literary translator.

**Annika Johansson** is an associate professor of Dutch studies at Stockholm University, where she teaches Dutch language proficiency, linguistics, and literature. Her research interests lie in the sociology of translation, contrastive linguistics, and language acquisition. She is the Swedish translator of Bart Moeyaert.

**Jack McMartin** is an associate professor of translation studies at KU Leuven and director of the Centre for Translation Studies (CETRA). His research explores the sociology of translation and translators, Dutch literature in translation, and the translation of science news. He co-edits the book series *Translation, Interpreting and Mediation* for Leuven University Press. He is also a Dutch–English translator.

**Sara Van Meerbergen** is an associate professor of Dutch studies at Stockholm University and director of the Dutch language section. She teaches language proficiency, linguistics, and translation. Her research focuses on multimodal discourse analysis, social semiotics, picture book studies, translation studies, and the sociology of translation.

**Irmak Mertens** holds a joint PhD in translation studies and semiotics from KU Leuven and the University of Tartu. She is a guest lecturer at KU Leuven and continues her research at the University of Tartu, focusing on museum translation, city translation, the semiotics of culture, imagology, and transmediality.

**Irina Michajlova** is a professor of Dutch at St Petersburg University. As a literary translator, she has received the NLPVF Translator's Prize (2005), the RusPrix Award (2011), and the Martinus Nijhoff Translation Prize (2020). In 2015, she was elected a foreign honorary member of the Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature.

**Elisa Nelissen** is an FWO postdoctoral fellow at KU Leuven. Her research explores how scientific findings are translated for lay audiences in the press. She has a background in applied linguistics, media studies, and science communication.

**Anja van de Pol-Tegge** studied applied linguistics and translation studies at Vrije Universiteit Brussel and earned a PhD in literary studies in 2021 from Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf. Her monograph *Belgische Literaturen in deutscher Übersetzung* (Transcript-Verlag) explores cultural and historical entanglements in Belgian–German literary translation history since 1945.

**Orsolya Réthelyi** is an associate professor and head of Dutch studies at ELTE, Budapest, as well as a literary translator. Her research focuses on intercultural transfer between the Low Countries and Hungary, Dutch

literature, and migration literature. She has co-authored and edited several works on these topics.

**Elaheh Rezvani** holds a PhD in translation studies from Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran. Her research explores the sociological formation of Persian translations of American literature before and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Her research interests include cultural studies, the sociology of translation, translator training, and translation assessment.

**Dolores Ross** is a senior scholar of Dutch and translation at the University of Trieste. Her research focuses on specialised translation, contrastive linguistics, and linguistic typology. She has co-authored Dutch and Afrikaans grammars and co-edited a volume on literary translation and imagology. She has also published on medical translation and health-care communication.

**Timothy Sirjacobs** studied French, German, and Dutch literature at Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf and holds an MA in education. A PhD candidate in translation studies at KU Leuven, he researches intra-Belgian translation flows of comics and poetry within the BELTRANS project.

**Goedele De Sterck** is an associate professor of translation studies at the University of Salamanca, where she teaches scientific-technical, literary, and news media translation. Her research interests include literature in translation, the sociology of translation, neology in translation, and translation technologies. She is also a literary translator from Dutch, French, and English into Spanish, and was awarded the Dutch Foundation for Literature's Translation Prize in 2018.

**Mareli Swart** holds an MA degree in translation studies from Stellenbosch University, where she researched the Afrikaans publishing market and popular fiction in translation. Her research interests include translation publishing, book market economics, and the impact of digital and social media marketing on publishers' marketing practices.

**Ekaterina Vekshina** holds an MA in Dutch language and literature from St Petersburg University, where she is currently a PhD candidate researching Russian translations of *Max Havelaar* under the supervision of Irina Michajlova. She is also programme coordinator at the Dutch Institute in St Petersburg and works as a freelance teacher and translator.



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# Introduction

## Literary Translation Lifecycles

*Jack McMartin*

Dutch literature<sup>1</sup> is one among many in the world literary system variously described as *small* (Chitnis 2019), *minor* (Averis et al. 2023), *less diffused* (Büchler and Trentacosti 2011; Pivato 1990), *dominated* (Casanova 1999, 2015), or *peripheral* (Heilbron 1999). Each of these terms carries distinct theoretical and social investments, but rhetorically they share a common function: to define Dutch literature in subordinate relation to larger, more dominant literary forces—above all, English. Translations have long tended to flow from dominant cultural and linguistic centres to the margins. Scholars have drawn attention to the disproportionate global influence of English, often cited as the source language for a significant share of translated books, while remaining relatively unresponsive to translations itself (Heilbron and Sapiro 2016; Rutherford et al. 2024). However, comprehensive and up-to-date global data on translation flows remains limited. The numbers we do have, which refer to the period 1980–2009 and are drawn from UNESCO’s imperfect *Index Translationum* translation database,<sup>2</sup> suggest a stark situation for Dutch: it is the source language for one percent of the world’s book translations, making it the ninth most widely diffused literary language after Danish and before Czech (Heilbron and Sapiro 2016, 380). Moreover, its traffic in translation is heavily one-sided—many more books are translated *into* Dutch than *out of* it. One of every four books published in Dutch is a translation, while only a tiny fraction of Dutch literary works ever make the reverse journey (McMartin 2020, 146). Of those that do, few reach bestseller lists, few win major literary prizes,<sup>3</sup> and fewer still “obtain world fame” (Heilbron 2020, 136). The most translated and internationally discussed Dutch book by far is a diary written in narrative form, Anne Frank’s *Het Achterhuis* (*Diary of a Young Girl*; see Gentile and Ross in this volume), which has become a monumentally important work of world literature despite falling outside its generic strictures. According to David Damrosch (2020, 226), only one Dutch author, Multatuli, can be said to have entered the canon of world literature, and he appears in the *ultraminor* category. The absence

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of a Dutch-language author among Nobel Prize in Literature laureates is yet another conspicuous marker of a marginal condition.

But translation is not solely a function of unequal relations or asymmetrical exchange. Many translated works are produced and circulate within the so-called peripheries, with or without mediation from the centres.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that peripheral positions in the global translation system do not always correspond to linguistic or demographic scale: languages such as Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic may be large in terms of speaker population or literary output yet still occupy structurally peripheral positions in the world translation system due to limited outward translation, restricted access to global publishing markets, or geopolitical and linguistic barriers. Furthermore, smaller literatures are defined not merely by their relationship to hegemonic languages or literary centres but also, perhaps even primarily, by the dense, interperipheral networks they form with one another. This shift in perspective enables to see that *small* is numerically *great*. It also underscores how smallness is not an exception but rather the norm in the world of literary translation. Those responsible for bringing translated books into being—translators, publishers specialising in translated literature, foreign rights managers, literary agents, scouts, translation grant administrators, editors, cover designers, distributors, booksellers—themselves often occupy structurally marginal yet indispensable positions in the global publishing ecosystem. Their work is what allows literatures like Dutch to travel, despite (and partly because) they mainly operate at a remove from the economies of scale and marketing machinery that underpin large-scale publishing. Relatively less constrained by commercial imperatives, mediators of translated literature respond to other imperatives—cultural, symbolic, institutional, and interpersonal. These include the desire to promote specific literary values, to foster intercultural dialogue, and to champion underrepresented voices, often working within or in alignment with publicly funded infrastructures and cultural policy frameworks that enable them to support translation projects that may not be commercially viable but are seen as culturally meaningful.

This volume offers fifteen cases in point, spanning as many target languages—from Swedish to Persian, Russian to Turkish, Afrikaans to English—and covering a diversity of genres: children's literature, poetry, non-fiction, graphic novels, contemporary fiction, classics.<sup>5</sup> The case studies contribute qualitative examples to the growing body of research on translated Dutch literature, which demonstrates that despite the structural imbalances of the world translation system, more and more Dutch literature is finding readers abroad (see [Bever et al. 2013](#); [Brems et al. 2017, 2020](#); [D'haen 2019](#); [Gentile 2021a](#); [van den Braber et al. 2021](#)). At stake in many of the case studies is the question of what counts as *literary*: by including works such as Anne Frank's *Het Achterhuis*, a memoir, and

Joke J. Hermsen's *Melancholie van de onrust*, a work of philosophical non-fiction, the volume acknowledges the socially constructed nature of literary value, the fluidity of genre conventions, and the ways in which both are often renegotiated in the context of translation. Behind each translation lies a rich and complex social world of dedicated individuals and institutions working to bring Dutch literature to new readers. This volume explores these actors as *makers* of translated literature, examining their motivations, their professional and personal networks, and the strategies they develop to navigate an uneven literary landscape. These networks—transnational, institutional, and often deeply human—form the vital infrastructures that sustain literary exchange. The term *vital*, included in the subtitle of the volume, refers both to cultural mediators' importance and to their human, embodied nature: without flesh-and-blood champions, Dutch literature would very likely cease to circulate beyond its linguistic borders. The lifecycle framework is equally grounded in this ethos of vitality, foregrounding the lived, contingent, and collaborative dimensions of the translation process as it plays out in reality.

### The social world of literary translation publishing

In *Under the Cover: The Creation, Production, and Reception of a Novel*, sociologist of literature Clayton Childress (2017) conceptualises the coming-into-being of a book as a lifecycle, tracing its progression through the interdependent fields of creation, production, and reception. This model follows a linear succession: authors create manuscripts, publishers produce and market them, and readers interpret their meaning. The process from one field to another is advanced by key intermediaries connecting these fields—for instance, literary agents bridge creation and production by scouting and refining manuscripts and placing them with publishers; reviewers connect production and reception by shaping a book's public discourse. The model is grounded in Bourdieu's field theory,<sup>6</sup> which understands fields as structured social arenas in which actors and institutions engage in competition for resources and forms of capital, governed by both implicit and explicit rules that define the dynamics of interaction (Bourdieu 1993; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Go and Krause 2016). In publishing fields, as in all fields of cultural production, capital can primarily be divided into economic capital (wealth) and symbolic capital (prestige) (Bourdieu 1999). The heuristic framework of capital offers a metalanguage for analysing actors' and institutions' strategic interactions in the field, which are assumed to centre around capital accumulation and conversion.

While it remains central to his model, Childress (2017) goes beyond traditional field theory by emphasising the relationships *between* fields,

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showing how changes in one can impact others, and arguing that actors within fields are not pre-programmed through their positions and habitus, but rather constantly engage in deliberation and recalibration, adapting to any given situation and constantly re-evaluating the relevant rules that apply:

While structural relations surely matter, so do relationships, as meanings are made in substantive interactions, and it is through the circuits of those interactions that novels are pitched across fields. As a practical matter, writers, publishers, and readers aren't living in different worlds, but they are certainly spending the vast majority of their time in different fields. How cultural objects like novels actually get from there to here requires a different conceptualization of the relationships within fields, and between fields. (Childress 2017, 9)

Despite its clear appeal for us, things become significantly more complex when one tries to apply Childress's model to a *translated* book. Unlike in monolingual publishing, a translation rarely begins in the field of creation, at least not as it is defined by Childress. Instead, translation projects are generally initiated within the (transnational) field of production, beginning with discovery and acquisition by a translation publisher or their proxy. Only after these preliminary stages are successfully completed does the full translation begin to take shape.

Moreover, a translated book is not simply a replication of the source text but a new and fully recontextualised cultural product (Venuti 2013), shaped by the material, institutional, cultural, and linguistic conditions of the receiving literary system. Its successful movement across fields requires a specialised group of intermediaries—individuals who not only can facilitate a translated book's transition between the fields of creation, production, and reception, but also mediate its passage from one culture and language to another. Such figures, which Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts (2018) refer to as *cultural mediators*, play a crucial role in translation publishing. The most pivotal among them (but rarely the most visible; see Freeth and Treviño 2024) is the translator, whose work involves both creation (of the translated manuscript) and cultural and commercial negotiation. Translation publishers, too, must bridge material and cultural fields simultaneously: they must manage the progression of a translation project across its production phases while continuously assessing how a given translation is likely to resonate in a new market and literary culture. A fundamental basis for both dispositions is *language proficiency*. As with translators, the bounds of a translation publisher's scope of practice in the transnational literary field is determined by the languages they speak and read. Lacking language proficiency, one must rely on mediators: an existing translation,

the opinion of a trusted associate (often another publisher), reader reports (often by translators), etc. Or they may turn to mediators promoting literature on behalf of national governments, such as the genre-specialised grant managers at the Dutch Foundation for Literature (Nederlands Letterenfonds) and its counterpart Flanders Literature (Literatuur Vlaanderen), two institutions to which I will return shortly. The rarer the source language, the more translation publishers must rely on cultural mediators, who become pivotal to co-determining which works reach new audiences.

Furthermore, translation lifecycles do not unfold in isolation; they are intertwined and mutually imbricated. Translation publishers frequently take cues from their counterparts working in other languages, shaping decisions based on patterns emerging in adjacent literary markets, or indicators of prestige and commercial viability accrued elsewhere in the transnational literary field (e.g., winning an important literary prize, being reviewed in a respected international newspaper, or achieving strong sales in other markets). Furthermore, publishers gravitate toward others who share similar editorial visions and elective affinities (Childress 2015), and they adopt similar practices perceived to be legitimate or successful (Franssen and Kuipers 2013). These considerations may even extend beyond the literary sphere to what Murray (2012) terms the *adaptation industry*: a book's appeal to a translation publisher may increase if it has been adapted into other media. All of these dynamics are prominently displayed during field-configuring events such as book fairs, literary festivals, and award ceremonies (see Broomans et al. 2021; Villarino Pardo 2023), which serve as crucial sites for deal-making, professional networking, and the reinforcement of publishing trends. In the world of translation publishing, the Frankfurt Book Fair stands as the foremost example.<sup>7</sup>

### *State agents in literary translation publishing*

Book fairs turn out to be interesting places to observe how state policies and the agents who implement them significantly shape translation publishing practices. Attending book fairs is a key strategy through which state agents promote national literatures. Securing guest of honour status—a platform first introduced at the Frankfurt Book Fair and now replicated across the international book fair circuit—allows a state agent to showcase their literature, thereby setting themselves apart within the broader publishing field.<sup>8</sup> This enhanced exposure can lead to international attention from publishers, stimulating new translation projects. Flanders and the Netherlands have jointly presented at the Frankfurt Book Fair twice, in 1993 and 2016, occasions that some observers have regarded as pivotal moments for the international recognition of Dutch literature (see McMartin 2016, 2021; Missinne 2018; van Voorst 2016).

## 6 *Literary Translation Lifecycles*

Two state agents figure prominently in this volume: the Dutch Foundation for Literature (DFL) and its counterpart in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region in Belgium), Flanders Literature (FL).<sup>9</sup> The politics and policies of state agents promoting national literatures through translation are well studied (see [Gentile 2021b](#); [Hedberg and Vimr 2022](#); [Heilbron and Sapiro 2018](#); [Kvirikashvili 2022](#); [Loogus and van Doorslaer 2021](#); [McMartin 2019a, 2019b](#); [Sapiro and Leperlier 2021](#); [Vimr 2022b](#); [Ziemann 2024](#)). This growing body of literature examines the interplay between market and state actors in translation publishing, highlighting different models of state intervention and evolutions in translation policies in relation to wider cultural diplomacy efforts (see also [Carbó-Catalan and Roig-Sanz 2022](#) and [Roig-Sanz et al. 2025](#), who frame translation as a soft power resource). Over time, translation policies have shifted from state-directed, supply-driven initiatives to more flexible, market-oriented curation, reflecting an increasing alignment with industry practices, what [Heilbron and Sapiro \(2007, 99\)](#) call a “shift from political to more economic constraints.” [Vimr \(2019\)](#) also observes that the perceived lack of market demand for literature from smaller literary traditions nonetheless often results in “supply-driven” translation policies, where the impetus for translation—and, in some cases, the translation itself—originates from the source culture rather than responding to target-market demand. A notable historical example from the Dutch field is the *Bibliotheca Neerlandica* (1954–1969), an ambitious initiative by one of the precursors of the DFL aimed at translating a selection of Dutch literary classics into English. The project ultimately failed due to poor management, a lack of consideration for the target audience, and low-quality translations ([Wolters 2022](#)). Learning from these setbacks, the Dutch government shifted its focus to improving translation quality through translator training and professionalisation, while also adopting a more market-responsive, target-oriented approach. Instead of being deputised from the diplomatic arm of the government, state agents promoting Dutch literature internationally are now recruited from the publishing industry. This model was also adopted by Flanders Literature from its founding in 1999 ([McMartin 2019a](#)). Today, these state agents present themselves to publishers as *genre specialists* (DFL) and *grant managers* (FL) and are fully professionalised, often coming to the job after having already developed an extensive professional network elsewhere in translation publishing. As a result, the supply-driven books they promote are much more strategically curated, and relationships with select translation publishers are cultivated over time. Policy success in this context depends on demonstrating a deep understanding of translation publishers’ lists, refining pitches, and persistently re-aligning offerings until the right match is found.

This market-savvy *push work* is coupled with a subtle yet often decisive *pull factor*: translation grants. Translation grants offset the costs of translating literary works and are often justified as a way to correct imbalances in the book market, supporting works that would otherwise go untranslated. Vimr (2022b), in his study “The Impact of Translation Subsidies on Publishing Decisions in Smaller European Countries,” finds that translation grants play a significant but uneven role in shaping publishers’ decisions. Small-scale literary publishers, who account for the majority of Dutch books in translation, are often heavily reliant on translation grants, without which they would be unable to publish translations at all. Midsized literary publishers use subsidies to diversify their catalogues and publish works from smaller or less well-known literatures but may also be comfortable taking risks with some titles that are not subsidised. Large-scale general and commercial publishers, few of which have interest in translating from Dutch or any other language, are generally not directly influenced by translation subsidies (Vimr 2022b, 837).

Translation grants are also a strategic tool for the DFL and FL to promote literature selectively. Both foundations have retooled translation grants to do more than offset the cost of translation. First, they serve as a quality control mechanism, as publishers receiving a grant must either work with a translator from the foundations’ directory of accredited translators or submit a sample translation for evaluation. If the sample is judged to be of insufficient quality (as it sometimes is, particularly for works with high symbolic capital in the source culture), the grant is withheld. Second, they help safeguard the socioeconomic status of translators by setting minimum fee standards, ensuring fair compensation. Third, they act as an incentive mechanism, prioritising certain translation projects over others; for example, translations of classic works from the Dutch literary canon (works that would be at home in *Bibliotheca Neerlandica*) are eligible for full reimbursement, whereas standard grants typically cover about half of the translation costs. These mechanisms also create constraints and opportunities for translators: in practice, a literary translator working from Dutch will find it more difficult to secure clients without first becoming accredited by the foundations. This makes engagement with the foundations’ translator professionalisation infrastructure unavoidable for emerging translators (see below). Conversely, once integrated into the foundations’ network, translators gain access to translation publishers as well as the recognition, belonging and prestige that comes with making the list. In short, accreditation is not just an important career milestone but a prerequisite for accessing the field.

While both foundations share the overarching goal of promoting Dutch-language literature internationally, they maintain distinct institutional identities and promotional goals linked to the mandates given by

## 8 *Literary Translation Lifecycles*

their respective governments. The DFL is an autonomous entity within the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science. FL is an autonomous government institution of the Flemish Government reporting to the Flemish Minister of Culture. While both rely wholly on public funds, their status allows for the formulation and implementation of policy at arm's length from the state. The foundations collaborate on several initiatives to promote Dutch-language literature and professionalise literary translators. One notable effort is the shared translation database (see [Dutch Foundation for Literature, n.d.](#); [Gracza 2023](#)), which provides public, searchable bibliographic data on more than 24,000 published translations from Dutch. The translator accreditation system is also co-administered, and both foundations support the Centre of Expertise for Literary Translation (Expertisecentrum Literair Vertalen, ELV), a partnership that includes the Dutch Language Union (Nederlandse Taalunie),<sup>10</sup> KU Leuven, and Utrecht University. The ELV focuses on translator education and training, offering programmes such as development grants and mentorships to foster new translation talent. Translators who do not achieve accreditation on their first attempt are often directed toward these programmes for further training and professional development. Finally, both foundations operate translators' houses in their respective home cities of Amsterdam and Antwerp, providing short-stay residencies for translators working on manuscripts. As the DFL and FL are central fixtures in the literary translation landscape of the Low Countries, each chapter examines the extent of the foundations' involvement in each particular case.

### **Studying literary translation lifecycles**

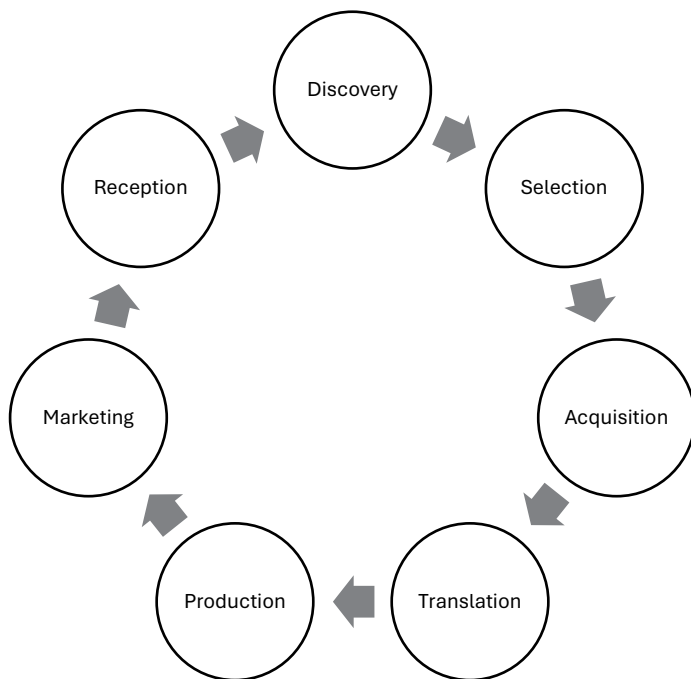
Given the complex social reality described above, a more complete conceptual model is needed than the one offered by Childress—one that captures not only the structural forces, institutions, and actors that shape *translation* publishing decisions but also the pathways that translation projects follow across material and cultural/linguistic fields. The concept of *literary translation lifecycles* attempts to offer such a model, providing a framework for understanding the distinct but interconnected stages through which translated books come into being and circulate.

The remaining sections briefly outline the phases of the translation lifecycle, illustrating each stage with examples from the case studies consolidated in this volume. All authors draw on the framework to analyse their case, contextualising with the help of quantitative data on translation flows, publisher profiles, reception materials, historicisation, or a combination of these approaches. This sets the background for the qualitative investigations, which draw on in-depth interviews with the actors

involved—translators, publishers, rights controllers, state agents, and marketing specialists—to uncover micro-level decision-making processes and relate them to larger-order factors.

The volume is structured into three parts, with chapters arranged according to the primary phase(s) of the translation lifecycle they examine. **Part I, Mediating Taste: Discovery, Selection, and Acquisition**, explores how literary works gain visibility, are selected for translation, and move toward publication in a new language. **Part II, Transforming Texts: Translation and Production**, investigates the creative, institutional, and editorial processes involved in shaping a market-ready translation, including the creation of the translation, editing practices, and paratextual framing. **Part III, Circulating Translations: Marketing and Reception**, considers how translated books are positioned in target markets, promoted to new readerships, and received by critics and readers. Taken together, these sections offer snapshots of translation lifecycles, illustrating both the structured mechanisms and contingent factors involved.

All chapters adopt the translation lifecycle model as their conceptual framework and engage with multiple phases of the translation process. While many cases could have fit into more than one section, we chose not to impose a strict phase-based delineation. Instead, the chapters are grouped according to the phase or phases that the author(s) identified as most pivotal or illustrative of their case. Although each chapter foregrounds particular stages of the lifecycle, the volume as a whole underscores the complex interdependencies between phases and the thematic continuities that cut across them. It also illustrates how actors frequently assume multiple roles within a single translation lifecycle, which helps to more completely describe actor agency. For instance, a translator may play a key role in bringing a work to the attention of a publisher (*discovery*), produce the translation (*translation*), and later participate in readings and promotional events once the translated book reaches the market (*marketing*). Chance repeatedly emerges as a key factor, as serendipitous connections can unexpectedly disrupt or accelerate a translation's lifecycle. In other words, translation lifecycles reflect a social reality that is inherently unpredictable and shaped by contingency (Meylaerts 2017). To quote Sirjacobs and Goethals in this volume, “agents act locally without having a coherent view of the whole, where the whole is different from the sum of its parts and causation between part and whole is bidirectional” (157). From this epistemological perspective, the lifecycle model (see [Figure 0.1](#)) offers a process-oriented, open-ended framework that recognises structural relations while also accounting for disruptions, non-linear trajectories, and the inherent unpredictability of literary circulation. This in turn underscores the need for historicised, contextualised, case-specific analysis.



*Figure 0.1* A lifecycle model of the coming-into-being and circulation of a translated book.

### *Discovery*

Discovery marks the initial stage in the translation lifecycle, where works are identified as potential candidates for translation. This phase may be driven by the intrinsic qualities of a text—its perceived literary merit, cultural significance, or topical appeal—but is equally shaped by external factors such as literary awards, market trends, the reputation of the author or source publisher, and broader industry dynamics. For some actors, such as scouts, acquiring editors, and translation publishers, discovery is a primary professional task, requiring active research, industry networking, and market analysis. Others, including foreign rights managers, source publishers, and state agents, are out to facilitate discoveries, vying for visibility, offering information in the form of promotional catalogues and websites, online translation databases, and information-sharing at international book fairs.

Discovery unfolds through a variety of practices, ranging from individual, habitual routines—such as regularly scanning reviews, bestseller lists, or prize announcements—to collective, structured mechanisms, including

pitch meetings at book fairs, and networking events. Discovery may also occur spontaneously and asymmetrically, for instance, when a publisher encounters a promising title through an unsolicited recommendation or a chance encounter. Whether systematic or serendipitous, discovery is a dynamic, multi-layered process that reflects both the agency of key actors and the structural conditions of the field.

The case of the Belgian author Bart Moeyaert, discussed in the opening chapter by **Annika Johansson** and **Sara Van Meerbergen**, illustrates how discovery can hinge on symbolic recognition, in his case, winning the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (ALMA), one of the world's most prestigious prizes for children's and young adult literature. The authors demonstrate how Moeyaert's visibility and selection for translation were shaped by the ALMA, which acted as a consecrating authority and massively increased his international visibility. Drawing on [Schwartz's \(2018\)](#) concept of multiple mediatorship—which posits that prizing results from the combined efforts of multiple mediators within interconnected networks—the chapter highlights the collective contributions of Flanders Literature, the Swedish publisher, and his proximity to the prize to explain how the ALMA, and through it the entire world of children's book publishing, came to discover Moeyaert's work.

### *Selection*

Selection represents a critical narrowing in the translation lifecycle, where works identified during discovery undergo further scrutiny before a commitment to acquisition is made. While many of the same actors—scouts, acquiring editors, translation publishers, foreign rights managers, source publishers, and state agents—remain involved, this stage introduces new dynamics and additional decision-makers. Unlike discovery, which casts a wide net, selection involves rigorous filtering: only books deemed to fit well enough to justify investment will advance. Agents who do not have the authority to act decisively on their own must convince their colleagues—whether editorial boards, publishers, or sales teams—that a book is worth acquiring. Their task is both subjective and strategic, balancing personal enthusiasm and taste with the realities of market demand, financial viability, and institutional priorities. This may involve enlisting the help of a cultural mediator with expertise in the source literature through the commissioning of reader reports, or reading existing translations.

For those seeking to secure selection for a book, success hinges on curation, visibility, personal networks, and taste alignment, as discussed above. Source publishers, foreign rights professionals and state agents work to position titles effectively, leveraging book fairs, industry connections, and strategic matchmaking to appeal to translation publishers. Well-crafted

itches, high-quality sample translations, and reliable information that can be used to quickly evaluate a potential selection (so-called pitch sheets) can increase a book's chances of selection. In many cases, success in this phase amounts to taste matching: interpersonal mediation resulting in a shared understanding that a book is the right match.

In other cases, selection results through reception-mediated appeal. **Luc van Doorslaer** ([chapter 2](#)) highlights how the international bestseller status of Herman Koch's *Het diner* (The dinner), combined with the perceived success of the German and English translations and the existence of Dutch and American film adaptations, was decisive for the Estonian publisher's selection decisions, as the publisher anticipated (incorrectly, it turns out) that the international acclaim and the films would attract Estonian readers. The case illustrates mediation through dominant literary centres—such as the German- and English-language markets—and the appeal that commercial success in these markets can hold for publishers working in a language like Estonian, which van Doorslaer terms “doubly peripheral” (48) due to its small population of native speakers and its linguistic isolation from most other European languages.

**Veronika Horáčková** and **Wilken Engelbrecht** ([chapter 3](#)) explore how the perceived prestige of *De ontdekking van de hemel* (The discovery of heaven) drove its selection by the Czech publisher, who considered it a major work by a prestigious author. The study situates the Czech publishing landscape in its historical context, tracing the transition from a state-controlled system under communism to a free-market model. This shift redefined selection practices, with even established, well-connected translators losing the agency to choose the titles they translate. Publishers now hold the final authority over selection, as this case demonstrates. At over six hundred pages, the book's length made a translation grant essential; this too influenced the publisher's selection decision.

### *Acquisition*

Acquisition marks the transition from selection to contractual commitment, encompassing the transfer of translation rights between publishers and the formalisation of agreements with the translator.

At this stage, if a translation grant from the DFL or FL is involved, these institutions will assert their oversight role. They assess whether the contract meets industry standards, ensure that the translator is properly accredited, and may require specific quality control measures before a translation grant is approved.

**Nasrin Ashrafi** and **Elaheh Rezvani** ([chapter 4](#)) explore the Persian translation of Stefan Brijs's *De engelenmaker* (The angel maker), highlighting a unique acquisition case due to Iran's non-adherence to international

copyright conventions. The lack of copyright obligations allows Iranian translators and publishers exceptional freedom in choosing books for translation, opening space for translators like Samgis Zandi. Through her personal taste, cultural sensitivity, and trusted position vis-à-vis a respected Iranian publisher, she succeeded in introducing a new cultural perspective to the Iranian literary elite. Zandi is revealed to be a pivotal cultural mediator bringing Dutch literature to Persian. The authors describe the growing body of translated Dutch works in Persian as an “emerging literary phenomenon” (84).

**Paola Gentile and Dolores Ross** (chapter 5) explore the entry of Anne Frank’s *Het Achterhuis* (The annex) into the Italian literary market, highlighting the intricate network of mediators involved. Otto Frank played a central role in acquisition negotiations, not only for the Italian translation but for many others as well. The chapter explores the diary’s many translation lifecycles in different languages, showing how Otto Frank’s “extensive networking combined with his business capability and marketing skills” (114) amplified Anne Frank’s voice. His efforts ultimately contributed to the diary’s integration into collective memory as a vital testimony to one of the darkest periods in Western history.

### *Translation*

Once acquisition is finalised, the translation lifecycle shifts, to use **Childress’s (2017)** terms, from the field of production to the field of creation. The translator, now under contract, begins the process of transforming the text for a new audience, ushering the book into its next phase: translation, synonymous with the translation process in its strict sense.

Translators play the most important role in this stage, but they rarely work in isolation. Their work is shaped through collaboration with editors, publishers, and authors, whose input helps refine the final text. They may also consult existing translations and discuss translation challenges with peers (generally other translators, occasionally the author of the source text). Editors may push for changes based on such things as market expectations, readability, or house style. In this collaborative setting, co-creators can clash over omissions, adaptations, and the balance between foreignising and domesticating translation strategies. Examining these tensions reveals not only the reasoning behind translation choices but also their underlying power dynamics and ideological investments. Such tensions, along with their textual and ethical implications, have been widely studied in translation studies, particularly since **Venuti (1995)**.

The creation phase is also conditioned by institutional factors, such as publisher expectations, deadlines, and contractual constraints, all of

which shape the translators' working conditions and the degree of freedom or compromise they can exercise. This phase concludes with the completion of the translated manuscript.

**Mareli Swart** and **Ilse Feinauer** (chapter 6) examine how editorial norms, ideological constraints, and contractual agreements shaped the Afrikaans translation of Guus Kuijer's *Polleke* series. They show that the South African publisher's preliminary norm (in Toury's terms) was to remain as close as possible to the source text. This was not merely a strategic choice, but a contractual requirement imposed by the Dutch publisher, which strictly prohibited omissions or additions. The case illustrates how adequacy norms—prioritising the source text's structure, style, and meaning—can sometimes be explicitly enforced through contractual agreements.

Situating their study within Belgium's increasingly divided multilingual literary landscape, **Timothy Sirjacobs** and **Ewoud Goethals** (chapter 7) examine how Charles Ducal's poetry circulated between the Flemish and Francophone communities through institutional and collaborative translation initiatives. They explore three in particular: Ducal's tenure as the "Belgian national poet," an initiative run by a civil society group to promote translation as a tool for cultural dialogue; the Passa Porta translator collective; and a poetry book series designed to introduce Flemish poets to French-speaking audiences. By highlighting these initiatives, the chapter presents collaborative translation as a form of civic engagement, demonstrating its potential in bridging linguistic and cultural divides within federalised Belgium.

Taking a descriptive, network-oriented approach, **Kim Andringa** and **Maud Gonne** (chapter 8) analyse the mediators behind the successful French translation of Lize Spit's *Het smelt* (The melting). They highlight the pivotal role of Philippe Noble, series director of Actes Sud's *Lettres néerlandaises* and a translator himself, across multiple stages—selection, translation, and production—but especially in the translation process. The translator, Emmanuelle Tardif, was relatively inexperienced and was mentored by Noble, who provided her with feedback and reread her work chapter by chapter. This hands-on mentorship dynamic shaped the translation, demonstrating how editorial and translation processes overlap in this phase. A particularly revealing case of collaborative decision-making was the French title choice. After an email exchange between the author, translator, Noble, and the editor-in-chief of foreign literature at Actes Sud, Manuel Tricoteaux, the final title, *Débâcle*, was selected—despite the author, translator, and Noble initially advocating for another option. This illustrates co-creation dynamics but also how translation is connected to production and marketing: because titles and other paratexts must not only convey meaning but also shape reader expectations and steer marketing, they present particularly complex translation challenges and often involve multiple stakeholders.

### *Production*

Production is the phase in which a final translated manuscript is transformed into a market-ready book. At this stage, the manuscript undergoes final editing (line editing, proofreading, etc.), formatting and cover design, and paratexts such as introductions, afterwords, blurbs, and translator's notes are added.

Beyond aesthetics, the production phase involves strategic editorial and design decisions that position the translated book within a specific cultural or literary tradition. These choices—such as whether to highlight the translator's role, how much to localise or universalise cultural references, and how to categorise the book—are shaped by publishers, editors, and designers, working to ensure the final product aligns with both market expectations and cultural sensitivities.

**Irmak Mertens** ([chapter 9](#)) examines the Turkish translation of Arnon Grunberg's graphic novel *Van Istanbul naar Baghdad* (From Istanbul to Baghdad), highlighting how the cover art was adapted to suit the target market. While both the Dutch and Turkish editions were illustrated by the same artist and initially intended to share a cover (a cartoon portrait of Grunberg's face), the Turkish publisher requested its removal, believing it would not appeal to local readers. Instead, the cover features a line of men and women in traditional Anatolian and Middle Eastern folk attire, dancing hand in hand, referencing a poignant scene from the book. Additionally, the Turkish publisher insisted on including a list of the cities Grunberg visited while writing the text, a politically charged decision in that it challenged the homogeneous national image promoted by Turkish national authorities, instead highlighting Turkey's regional diversity, including the Kurdish minority. These production choices reflect the publisher's intent—not to maximise sales, but to provoke a reaction among Turkish readers.

**Anja van de Pol-Tegge** ([chapter 10](#)) examines how translation choices, cultural sensitivities, and the reception context shaped—and ultimately halted—the distribution of the German translation of Louis Paul Boon's *Mieke Maaïke's obscene jeugd* (Mieke Maaïke's obscene youth). Through a comparative analysis of the Dutch original and the German translation, the study demonstrates how the translator's interventions altered the meaning of the text, making the sexual content more explicit in ways that clashed with contemporary German cultural norms. While the translation was printed and ready for distribution at the 2016 Frankfurt Book Fair, the publisher's final assessment of the reception climate—particularly shifting sensitivities around depictions of sexual assault—led to a last-minute retraction. It is a rare case where production was completed, but marketing and reception concerns blocked distribution. The chapter also discusses the translation's problematic afterword: while intended as a reading guide,

it failed to acknowledge the sexualised violence in the text and instead reinterpreted the novella as a *Bildungsroman* and literary satire, even portraying the child protagonist as a seductive and destructive force. This framing not only reversed victim and perpetrator roles but also clashed with contemporary ethical norms, further complicating the publisher's dilemma.

### *Marketing*

Marketing is the phase in the translation lifecycle where a translated book, now a cultural product ready to bring to market, is actively positioned and distributed to reach its intended readership. It involves strategic efforts to generate visibility, build anticipation, and drive sales, ensuring that the translated book does not disappear into the vast literary landscape (as many do). This phase brings together marketing teams, publicists, booksellers, and translators, all working to steer the book's reception and connect with readers.

Marketing strategies vary depending on budget, publisher size, and market positioning, but common tools include social media campaigns, press releases, author and translator interviews, literary festival appearances, and book tours. The translator may play a role, acting as a surrogate for the author and helping to contextualise the book for readers in the receiving culture. For smaller publishers, targeted marketing through niche networks (e.g., literary blogs, independent bookstores, cultural institutions, and social networks) is often crucial, whereas larger publishing houses may have the resources for more ambitious campaigns, bookshop placement, and mainstream media coverage. Reviews in prestigious outlets and literary prizes can further amplify visibility and create momentum.

Marketing also functions as a precursor to reception, shaping how a translated book is framed and discussed. The way a book is positioned—as a literary discovery, a prize-winning work, or part of a broader trend—can influence how critics, booksellers, and readers engage with it. At its most effective, marketing not only finds an audience, it also helps construct the narrative through which a book is received in the target culture.

**Bojana Budimir** (chapter 11) examines how social media strategies influence the visibility and reception of Dutch literature in the Serbian market, demonstrating the growing role of digital promotion in the translation book trade. The study highlights how Booka, a small independent publisher, relies on social media branding, influencer engagement, and community-driven marketing to introduce Dutch literary works to local readers, compensating for the lack of traditional media coverage.

**Ekaterina Vekshina and Irina Michajlova** (chapter 12) examine how a small independent Russian children's book publisher, Samokat, aligned

its editorial vision with the Dutch tradition of publishing bold, unflinching books for young readers, using Guus Kuijer's *Het boek van alle dingen* (The book of everything) as a case study. The chapter highlights the 2013 Russian–Dutch Year of Friendship, which, despite political tensions, brought Kuijer to Russia, where he engaged directly with young readers and participated in literary events and discussions. It also explores the book's reception in Russia, showing how readers and critics responded to its controversial theme of domestic abuse, a persistent societal issue in Russia. Not all readers embraced the book, but by aligning its own ethos and self-marketing with Kuijer's story, Samokat underscored its commitment to publishing brave books. As testament to this, the publisher even adopted a line from the book as its company tagline: "If you want to be happy, stop being scared."

### Reception

Reception marks the final phase of the translation lifecycle, when a translated work enters the public sphere and begins to interact with its audience—critics, readers, scholars, and others—who interpret, evaluate, and respond to it. A book's reception is shaped by both professional readers (such as reviewers, prize juries, and influencers) and everyday readers. Reception materials—reviews, media coverage, sales figures, interviews, and scholarly engagement—can all influence a translation's visibility, cultural standing, and long-term circulation. Some books garner wide critical attention and reach broad audiences; others remain confined to niche readerships or academic circles. Many translations, unfortunately, generate no reception at all.

Beyond traditional forms of reception, some translations generate *productive* reception, meaning they inspire adaptations—theatre productions, films, sometimes even Netflix series.<sup>11</sup> This can extend the book's reach, embedding it more deeply in the receiving culture.

Reception also has the potential to trigger new translation lifecycles. A well-received translation may pave the way for new translations of the same author in the language, and a strong reception in one language can often influence publishers in other markets, leading to new translations elsewhere. In this way, the model of the translation lifecycle can be cyclical, with reception feeding back into discovery and selection in other linguistic and literary systems, as described above.

A remarkable example of these dynamics can be found in the chapter by **Krisztina Gracza** and **Orsolya Réthelyi** ([chapter 13](#)), which compares the contrasting trajectories of two Dutch children's books in the Hungarian literary field. The Hungarian translation lifecycle of *Honderd uur nacht* (A hundred hours of night) progressed smoothly, with only a brief delay due to a

translator accreditation issue, which was eventually resolved. In contrast, the case of *Koning & Koning* (King & king) took a far more indirect and unconventional path. The fairy tale about a young prince who falls in love with another prince emerged without illustrations as a poem, very loosely based on a Czech translation of the Dutch source text. *Meseország mindenké* (A fairy tale for everyone) was included in an anthology of inclusively retold fairy tales, published by the Labrisz Lesbian Association, located in Hungary. The anthology became an unexpected bestseller in Hungary's polarised political climate, selling 19,000 copies and gaining international attention, despite—or perhaps because of—intense far-right backlash. A Hungarian MP publicly shredded the book, and the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán condemned its message. Yet the controversy only fuelled the anthology's success, leading to multiple translations—including one into Dutch. Placed alongside a 'conventional' translation lifecycle, this instance highlights a complex form of productive reception, where an interperipheral translation sparked an international phenomenon, ultimately bringing the story back to its original language in a new form.

**Carmen Clavero Fernández** and **Goedele De Sterck** ([chapter 14](#)) examine how the growing flow of Dutch non-fiction into Spain connects to broader policy questions about definitions of literature and how to promote it. The study highlights how Spanish readers and publishers are increasingly receptive to non-fiction that blurs the boundaries between essay, philosophy, and narrative-driven inquiry, reflecting a broader shift in perceptions within Spain toward recognising non-fiction as a legitimate literary genre. Tracing the marketing and reception of Joke Hermsen's *Melancholie van de onrust* (Melancholy in times of turmoil), the chapter demonstrates how changing genre definitions influence the positioning of translations and how institutional frameworks shape their visibility. The authors argue that while translation grants remain crucial, support should also be extended to post-publication promotion.

Finally, **Jack McMartin** and **Filip De Ceuster** ([chapter 15](#)) examine cyclical dynamics, using the long-awaited English translation of Gerard Reve's *De avonden* (The evenings) as a case study. The study highlights Reve's fraught relationship with English, first through his own failed exophonic writing and his later reluctance to approve translations. Despite multiple attempts to publish an English translation of *De avonden*, no less than four translation projects stalled. But the book's champions at the DFL and De Bezige Bij continued to seek publishers, eventually finding multiple matches—at the same time. After an eventful and at times perilous acquisition phase involving multiple bids and jockeying over who would translate the prestigious book, Pushkin Press and Sam Garrett eventually prevailed. *The Evenings* was published in 2016 to great acclaim, nearly seventy years after Reve's debut appeared in Dutch. Pushkin branded the novel for Anglophone

readers as a “cornerstone manqué of modern European literature” and Reve as “the first openly gay writer in the country’s history.” The translation enjoyed a second wave of success in 2020, when the pandemic struck and its sardonic protagonist Frits van Egters’s scenario of killing time became uncannily relatable.

### Full-circle

This introduction has sought to summarise both the chapters in the volume and the conceptual framework they share. A literary translation lifecycle is an exploratory framework for analysing the human-driven material stages that shape the production, circulation, and reception of a translated book. Building on sociological approaches—particularly Childress’s model (2017) of the novel and field theory—informed perspectives on translation publishing—this framework offers an understanding of how books cross cultural and linguistic boundaries. It describes the coming-into-being of a translated book in terms of dynamic interactions between global structures, national publishing fields, and networks of actors. These interactions create constraints and opportunities, gives rise to editorial and translation norms, and ultimately explain translation flows. For analytical purposes, a translation’s lifecycle consists of interdependent yet distinct phases: discovery, selection, acquisition, translation, production, marketing, and reception. Cultural mediators—including translators, publishers, editors, rights controllers, and state agents—initiate and sustain translation lifecycles, vitalising networks and connecting fields. Acknowledging the contingent and complex nature of social reality, the model advocates for case-specific, contextualised, and historicised analysis that accommodates non-linear translation trajectories, identifies pivotal phases and interventions, and explains influencing factors inductively. This framework underpins the case studies in *Literary Translation Lifecycles*. While the cases collected here are all connected to Dutch literature, the model used to explore them may prove helpful in exploring the lifecycle of any translated book—and the vital transnational networks that sustain it.

These networks extend to and include the researchers who study them. The present volume is a creative product of a two-year interdisciplinary research project funded by the Dutch Language Union and KU Leuven and coordinated by myself and Paola Gentile. It brought together thirty-two junior and senior researchers working at the intersection of international Dutch studies and translation studies. The research presented in this volume was first shared during the international conference Cultural Policy, International Publishers, and the Circulation of Dutch Literature in Translation, held in Brussels in June 2022. Moving along a lifecycle of its own, it is now in the hands of a reader.

## Notes

- 1 The term *Dutch literature* in this volume refers to literary works written originally in the Dutch language.
- 2 The UNESCO *Index Translationum* collects bibliographic data on translated books published from 1979 to approximately 2012. While some entries exist for later years, data completeness declines significantly after 2009, with only limited records processed for 2010–2012. This decline is due to inconsistent national reporting by member states, submission delays, and processing gaps. Consequently, while the database offers valuable historical insights, especially for the period 1979–2009, it provides only a patchy and unreliable picture of global translation flows.
- 3 A recent exception is *De avond is ongemak* (*The Discomfort of Evening*), for which Lucas Rijneveld and Michele Hutchison won the 2020 International Booker Prize.
- 4 According to Heilbron (2020), what gets translated in peripheral languages often depends on the selection that takes place in the centres. He argues that this is where transnational symbolic capital is accrued and distributed and where the most important hierarchies of prestige are formed. Vimr (2022a) critiques this position, emphasising instead the multiple overlapping circuits of connectivity that influence the choices translation publishers make. Kvirikashvili (2025), examining literary circulation in the Caucasus–Black Sea region, shows that, in some cases, interperipheral literary transfer occurs entirely independently from the centres.
- 5 *Classics* refers to works that have entered the national literary canon and often benefit from additional translation support by state agents due to their perceived cultural significance.
- 6 Bourdieu's analysis of the publishing field (2008), originally focused on nineteenth-century France, has been foundational for translation publishing research. Sapiro (2008) extended his ideas, introducing the transnational literary field (2020) to examine literary circulation across borders and the role of translation in accumulating and converting symbolic capital (2015, 2016). Heilbron and Sapiro (2007, 2016) apply field theory to the study of translation flows, while Leperlier (2021) confronts it with plurilingual literary spaces. Carbó-Catalan and Kvirikashvili (2022) explore Bourdieu's influence on studies of literary circulation from the periphery. Buzelin (2005, 2006) integrates field theory with actor-network theory to analyse translation publishers. These perspectives resonate with broader field-theoretical discussions in world literature (Boschetti 2014; Casanova 1999; Damrosch 2003; Prendergast 2004). For a comprehensive survey of Bourdieu's impact on translation studies, see da Silva (2020).
- 7 See McMartin and Gentile (2020) for an analysis of how Frankfurt shaped the transnational production and reception of Stefan Hertmans's *Oorlog en terpentijn* (2016; War and turpentine) across thirty languages, starting with the German translation.
- 8 Initially, the guest of honour platform at the Frankfurt Book Fair was a forum for books on social and political issues, curated and funded by the German Publishers and Booksellers Association (Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels). The theme alternated between a special topic and a guest country or region. In 1988, a bid-based model was introduced, requiring prospective guests (state agents) to submit budgets, outreach plans, translation subsidies, and pavilion designs. This shift made the platform a tool for promoting national literatures internationally (see Weidhaas 2007).

- 9 For a more extensive discussion of the institutional history and policies of the Dutch Foundation for Literature and its predecessors, see [Heilbron and van Es \(2015\)](#). For the same on Flanders Literature, see [McMartin \(2019a\)](#). Both foundations also support translations into Dutch and the production of Dutch-original works. This introduction focuses only on outward-facing translation policies.
- 10 The Dutch Language Union is an international body responsible for the regulation and promotion of the Dutch language. Established in 1980 by a treaty between the Netherlands and Belgium, it works to support Dutch language and literature on a global scale. The body oversees language standardisation, publishing the official spelling guide, and provides support for Dutch studies departments worldwide.
- 11 Tonke Dragt's historical novel for children *De brief voor de koning* (1962) has seen many instances of creative reception, among them a 2020 Netflix series. This came about after Pushkin Press published Laura Watkinson's translation, *The Letter for the King*, in 2013, its first (but not last; see [McMartin and De Ceuster](#) in this volume) translation from Dutch.

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Part I

# Mediating Taste: Discovery, Selection, and Acquisition



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# 1 Connecting Multiple Mediatorships and Literary Awards

## The Case of Bart Moeyaert and the ALMA in Sweden and Beyond

*Annika Johansson and Sara Van Meerbergen*

In 2019, the Flemish Belgian writer Bart Moeyaert was awarded the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (ALMA). Moeyaert was the second Dutch-language author to receive this prestigious international prize for children's literature, after Guus Kuijer in 2012. While it is generally argued that (inter)national literary awards lead to an accumulation of symbolic capital, higher consecration, and, thus, more translation (Broomans et al. 2021; Sapiro 2016a), several studies have shown that the most coveted literary prizes—e.g., the Nobel Prize in Literature or the Hans Christian Andersen Award for children's literature—have not in all cases actually resulted in more widespread translation (Alvstad and Borg 2020; Edfeldt et al. 2022). Besides literary awards, other important cultural mediating institutions—that is, institutions that have an influence on the mediation or (trans)national spreading of culture (Sapiro 2016a, 2016b)—that have been pointed out specifically for Dutch-language literature in translation are the state agents Flanders Literature (FL; Literatuur Vlaanderen) and the Dutch Foundation for Literature (DFL; Nederlands Letterenfonds). These publicly funded institutions promote literature at events such as international book fairs or literary festivals as part of what has been called a practice of nation-branding (McMartin 2021), often joining forces and collectively promoting the literature of the Low Countries. Above all, though, they subsidise the translation of Dutch-language literature through translation grants, which, according to earlier studies, are essential for this literature's transnational circulation within the literary periphery (Heilbron and Sapiro 2018; McMartin 2019, 2020; Vimr 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Viewing translation as a social practice (van Doorslaer and McMartin 2022), a first goal in this chapter is to map and study the main cultural mediating actors and institutions with consecrating power involved in the translation of Bart Moeyaert's work within the Swedish target culture, which is also the home culture of the ALMA. We then analyse the role of the ALMA as a consecrating authority and its potential impact

on the transnational circulation of Moeyaert's work by comparing translation flows in Swedish and in other languages pre- and post-ALMA. Furthermore, we investigate the mediating role of the state agent FL as an institution of power, granting both symbolic and economic capital (McMartin 2019, 2021), and its influence on the transnational circulation of Moeyaert's authorship in Sweden and beyond.

In our analysis, we put special focus on forms of *multiple mediatorship(s)* established by transnational networks constructed around and between mediating actors and institutions of power, each playing their specific role in the chain of events leading to the circulation, translation, and consecration of a specific authorship (Schwartz 2018). Alongside ALMA and FL, we therefore also analyse the role of Bart Moeyaert's Swedish publisher Lilla Piratförlaget. We focus on this publisher's transnational network, consisting of foreign publishers, authors, and other actors and institutions, as well as the translation policy that this network informs (Edfeldt et al. 2022; Franssen and Kuipers 2015). Moreover, we investigate the specific agency of the author in positioning himself as a (trans)national cultural persona, adding to his own symbolic capital, the marketing, and thus self-mediation of his work. An important methodological goal of our study is to further integrate the concept of multiple mediatorship(s) as part of an analysis of transnational circulation. We subscribe to the claim made by Cecilia Schwartz (2018) that a study of mediating networks is especially fruitful to understand the mechanisms involved in transnational flows within the literary (semi-)periphery.

### **Transnational flows, consecration, and translation within the (semi-)periphery**

Dutch is a relatively large European language when it comes to the number of native speakers, roughly 23 million, but it is still considered a peripheral or smaller language in the context of the global field of translation (Brems et al. 2018; D'haen 2019; Heilbron 1999; McMartin 2020; van Es and Heilbron 2015). While some studies within translation sociology have focused on analysis of transnational contacts between Dutch and what are called hyper-central or central languages, such as English or German (Heilbron 1999; McMartin 2016, 2020; van Es and Heilbron 2015), others have focused on the transnational circulation of Dutch literature within the literary periphery (Brems et al. 2020; McMartin and Gentile 2020). This chapter, however, focuses on the dynamics and literary transfer between periphery and semi-periphery, specifically, between the Dutch and Swedish language areas.

According to Johan Heilbron (1999, 434), the differences between periphery and semi-periphery are not always clear-cut and should be viewed

as more gradual, also depending on the point of reference (Schwartz 2017). As argued by Lindqvist (2016), though, the Swedish language area seems to have grown into a specific semi-peripheral position, giving rise to particular power dynamics in relation to its peripheral neighbouring languages Danish and Norwegian, within what is referred to as the Scandinavian or Northern translation field (see also Edfeldt et al. 2022). The Swedish semi-peripheral position within the global field of translation can be linked to the steady number of classics and the success of Scandinavian crime fiction translated from Swedish into many languages, which peaked around the turn of the millennium (Edfeldt et al. 2022, 8).

When it comes to translating children's literature and literature for young adults in Swedish, it is particularly interesting to note that the Dutch language has obtained a rather solid position during the last decades, based on the number of titles translated each year. In the annual statistics on translated children's literature presented by the Swedish Children's Books Institute, *Svenska Barnboksinstitutet* (n.d.), it is clear that Dutch steadily follows after the central languages English, German, and French and neighbouring peripheral languages Danish and Norwegian, and often exceeds translations from other (semi-)peripheral languages, such as Italian, Spanish, Polish, Portuguese, or Finnish, a trend that was already noted by Van Meerbergen (2010). As earlier research has shown, English, French, or German can function as pivot languages for translation within the periphery, granting both symbolic capital and visibility and accessibility, as many foreign publishers are familiar with these languages (Heilbron 2000; Heilbron and Sapiro 2007; Sapiro 2016b; Vimr 2020). German has been shown to function consistently as a cultural intermediary for Dutch-language literature within the literary periphery (Brems et al. 2020, 130; Heilbron 1999, 2000; McMartin 2020; Wikén Bonde 1997), as has English, albeit to a lesser extent (Heilbron 2020; McMartin and Gentile 2020). The intermediary role of German and English is also evident in the translation of Dutch-language children's literature into Swedish (Van Meerbergen 2008, 2010). Furthermore, the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1993 and 2016, when the Netherlands and Flanders were guest of honour, were important literary events within the German language area that increased the visibility of Dutch-language literature on a transnational level (McMartin 2021; van Es and Heilbron 2015).

### **Transnational networks and multiple mediatorships**

As has been described in earlier research, symbolic capital can be granted through consecrating authorities, such as literary institutions and actors of power (literary prizes, academies, state agents, critics, publishers, academics, translators of a certain status, etc.), but also through circulation and

translation itself (Broomans et al. 2021; Damrosch 2003; Heilbron 1999; Sapiro 2016a, 2016b). The ultimate aim for an author, then, is to gain international prestige and to become part of what is called world literature (Casanova 2004; Lindqvist 2019). So far, we have mainly described and analysed the overall power balance and the dynamics between the Dutch and Swedish language areas on a macro level. To map and study the circulation, translation, and consecration of Bart Moeyaert's authorship more specifically, an analysis of the agents and institutions involved in this specific transnational transfer process on meso (national) and micro (individual book) levels would also be required (Heilbron and Sapiro 2007; van Es and Heilbron 2015).

At the same time, it is important to note that actors and institutions involved in literary exchange often operate on several (trans)national levels simultaneously, so it is not always easy or straightforward to study the meso and micro levels separately from each other, as Nicky van Es and Johan Heilbron (2015) propose. As shown by Schwartz (2018, 529), focusing on the study of the transnational processes, flows, and networks created by institutions and actors, rather than studying the micro, meso, and macro levels separately, proves especially fruitful in understanding how specific literary works or authorships travel within the literary (semi-)periphery by providing "a less hierarchic and non-linear way of describing the conditions for transnational circulation." In line with Schwartz (2018, 2), we therefore focus on the study of multiple mediatorships and the "combined contributions of several mediators as members of interconnected networks." The overall idea is that each transnational exchange is the result of chains of events shaped by a collaborative effort co-constituted by several mediating actors, each operating within and informed by their own networks and motivations in the transnational field of literary production and exchange. At the same time, we want to expand Schwartz's (2018, 529) concept of multiple mediatorship from "many individuals included in interconnected networks" to include all mediating chains involved in transnational exchange. Our approach incorporates not only actors, but also institutions and other mediating mechanisms, such as translation into intermediary transit languages (in our case German), as was described above and will be elaborated below. Since it is never possible to reconstruct an exact chain of events and to map out all the parties included in a specific transnational exchange, we focus on the mediating instances and mechanisms that we found to be most central and crucial when it comes to the circulation of Bart Moeyaert's authorship in Sweden pre- and post-ALMA. In the following sections, we present these mediating actors, institutions, and mechanisms in more detail.

### Bart Moeyaert as a self-mediator

Bart Moeyaert published his first book, *Duet met valse noten* (Duet out of tune), in 1983, at the age of nineteen. Since then, he has published (as of 2024) more than fifty children's books, poetry books and novels, but also numerous plays and TV scripts, many of them translated into various languages (Moeyaert, n.d.). From 1995 onwards, the prestigious publishing house Querido, based in the Netherlands, has been the main publisher of Moeyaert's work.

However, Moeyaert has more than one string to his bow. He has made Dutch translations of books from German, English, and French, was appointed poet laureate of the city of Antwerp from 2006 to 2007, and took on the role of artistic director of the guest of honour programme (of the Netherlands and Flanders combined) for the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2016. He is also a repeat visitor at the Bologna Children's Book Fair, which is considered by many today as the most important international fair for children's books. This paints a picture of Moeyaert's versatility, which has given him a noticeable presence in the literary and cultural landscape both in Flanders and internationally, something also noted by Vanessa Joosen and An Stessens (2019, 6):

Above all, Bart Moeyaert's unique talent in combination with the energy he puts into national and international contacts has resulted into a lively interest for children's literature from authors, readers, and critics who before considered children's literature a minor literary genre. In this respect the entire Flemish scene of children's literature is greatly indebted to him.

Moreover, Bart Moeyaert has been nominated for and has received a multitude of literary prizes in his native country, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Finally, his international recognition came in 2019 when he was awarded the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. Moeyaert was furthermore short-listed for the Hans Christian Andersen Award, the second most prestigious international literary award for children's literature, in the 'Best author' category, in 2002, 2012, 2020, and 2024 (International Board on Books for Young People, n.d.).

All these details show how Moeyaert has worked over the years to establish and position his work and himself as a cultural persona on the international (children's) literary scene. He has grown to become an acclaimed, award-winning author, a "brand name" (Sapiro 2016b, 12) with strong symbolic capital on a transnational level. On social media, a vital marketing tool in today's book industry (Nolan and Dane 2018), Moeyaert is an active promoter and self-mediator of his authorship, sharing his

latest literary achievements mixed with some personal reflections on life, using this form of public performance to create a direct link and personal bond with his audience of followers (Chouliaraki 2010). Moeyaert himself can be seen as a mediating actor, thus being part of a mediating network. His authorship manifests itself at various levels, having been translated into several languages and nominated for and awarded with national and international literary prizes. Taken together, this eventually leads up to his winning the ALMA.

### **The translation history of Moeyaert in Sweden—not a straightforward story**

When studying the history of Swedish translations of Moeyaert's work, three translation waves can be identified, involving four different Swedish publishing houses. Similar translation waves have been noted for other Dutch-writing authors of children's literature in Swedish translation. For example, while Dick Bruna's authorship needed several translation waves as well as international commercial success to gain status and command a central position on the global book market (Van Meerbergen 2010), other authors have not obtained any real international recognition or consecration, despite several translation attempts (see also Broomans 2021) or the mediation of highly positioned cultural actors in the target culture. This was the case with Annie M. G. Schmidt, who was introduced in Sweden by publishing editor and children's literature author Astrid Lindgren but never gained status or fame in this target culture (Van Meerbergen 2017).

Moeyaert's first book to be translated into Swedish was *Afrika achter het hek* (Africa behind the fence), published by Bonnier Carlsen. This picture book was originally published in Dutch by Querido in 1995 and translated into Swedish that same year, a remarkable and atypical turnover. The fact that the well-known Swedish author and illustrator Anna Höglund created the illustrations for the original Dutch edition may have prompted the Swedish publisher's immediate interest in Moeyaert's work and especially in this picture book. A similar mediating effect of international collaboration between Dutch-language children's literature authors and Swedish or internationally renowned illustrators, such as Marit Törnqvist, Wolf Erlbruch, or Rotraut Susanne Berner, has been noted by Sara Van Meerbergen (2008, 2010, 94).

A second wave came about when Rabén & Sjögren in 2001 published the Swedish translation of *Het is de liefde die we niet begrijpen* (It's love we don't understand). This novel was originally published in 1999. Between 1946 and 1970, Astrid Lindgren worked as a publisher at Rabén & Sjögren, where her own books were also published (Rabén &

Sjögren, n.d.). To be published by this publisher can thus be seen as highly prestigious within the Swedish context of children's literature. Interestingly enough, no other works by Moeyaert were published with Rabén & Sjögren, not even in 2019, when a third wave started after Moeyaert won the ALMA. When the winner was announced, the publisher Lilla Piratförlaget immediately bought the translation rights for three books and republished the previously translated *Het is de liefde die we niet begrijpen* with a slightly revised title, followed by *Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry* (Everyone's called Sorry nowadays) in that same year, *Broere* (Brothers) in 2020, and *Morris. De jongen die de hond vond* (Morris: The boy who found the dog) in 2023. Moreover, in 2020 and 2022, Moeyaert was introduced to adult readers when the publishing house Rámus, which specialises in translated European literature, published the Swedish translations of his novel *Graz* (2020b) and a volume of poetry, *Helium* (2022a). The fact that Moeyaert was awarded the ALMA likely prompted these translations, and Moeyaert's growing prestige and consecration is evident by yet another publishing house taking on his novel as well as his poetry for adults. The impact of the ALMA outside Sweden will be addressed later in this chapter under transnational flows.

### Swedish publishing house Lilla Piratförlaget

The role of publishers is generally described in terms of *gatekeeping* in that they have the ultimate power to decide what is published and what is not (Sapiro 2016b). To gain more insight into the potential mediating role of Moeyaert's Swedish publisher, an interview was conducted online with Erik Titusson on April 23, 2021, using a set of previously formulated, in-depth questions related to Lilla Piratförlaget's workflow and editorial policy regarding translated literature, both generally and with regards to Moeyaert's work. The interview was recorded and transcribed, and the two authors collaboratively identified and discussed which elements were most relevant to include in the analysis. In the interview, Titusson states that he founded Lilla Piratförlaget in 2011 on his own and that it specialises in children's and young adult literature. Titusson started out as a marketing executive at the publishing house Rabén & Sjögren. He then took on the job of administrative director for the ALMA before founding Lilla Piratförlaget. His view on children's literature has been influenced by both his earlier work at a commercial Swedish publishing house and the non-commercial organisation of the ALMA, where his administrative work gave access and insight into jury meetings and their extended knowledge on international authorships. This forms the backdrop to the launch of Lilla Piratförlaget. According to Titusson, one of the objectives of his publishing house is to seek out quality literature both in Swedish and in

Swedish translation. Titusson expressly mentioned that when considering translation rights for books written in languages other than Swedish, he prefers to look beyond the Anglophone world. Following Bourdieu's (1993) logic of literary fields and the division between large-scale publishers, where market and economic capital prevail, and small-scale publishers, where symbolic capital prevails, Lilla Piratförlaget falls somewhere between the large- and small-scale poles. Using criteria set up by McMartin (2016, 62), such as a modest number of staff (ten or fewer employees) and yearly title output (in the low double digits), one can claim that Lilla Piratförlaget in the past belonged to the small-scale pole of the publishing industry. Even so, in 2015, Lilla Piratförlaget merged with Gilla Böcker (a small, independent publishing house), and as of 2022 forms a holding company together with the well-known publisher of children's books Alfabetabeta. Alfabetabeta, established in 1978, publishes approximately fifty titles per year and focuses on quality titles (Alfabetabeta, n.d.). This fusion clearly suggests a strategy of taking a bigger slice of the market, indicative of a middle-scale publishing house.

Lilla Piratförlaget has published seven ALMA recipients: Kitty Crowther (2010), Shaun Tan (2011), Isol (2013), Meg Rosoff (2016), Bart Moeyaert (2019), Jean-Claude Mourlevat (2021), and Eva Lindström (2022)<sup>2</sup>. This is a sizeable number, considering that the total number of laureates between 2003 and 2024 is twenty. In our interview, Titusson mentioned that he made contact with the foreign rights manager of Querido—whom he knew personally—at the Bologna Children's Book Fair upon the announcement of the ALMA winner and immediately presented an offer for the Swedish rights together with an elaborate publishing plan for Moeyaert's work, in which a reprint of *Het is de liefde die we niet begrijpen*<sup>3</sup> would be presented at the award ceremony in Stockholm in May 2019.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Titusson stated that he had already known Moeyaert personally for years through Moeyaert's German publisher, had met him at book fairs, and had read Moeyaert's books in German. This last point clearly demonstrates the importance of German as a central language serving as an intermediary and a transit language between two languages and areas in the (semi-)periphery (see above).

All in all, this suggests that there is a publishing strategy at Lilla Piratförlaget consisting of keeping track of the work of the ALMA jury, which is in line with Titusson's background. Considering that Moeyaert was nominated for the ALMA every year from 2004 onwards until he received the award in 2019, Moeyaert's prominence must have been evident to Titusson in his former function as administrative director and later as publisher.<sup>5</sup> Looking at the story behind Lilla Piratförlaget's translation policy when it comes to Moeyaert's authorship, it becomes clear that networking is central in Titusson's role as publisher—which he also explicitly stated in

the interview. We can clearly see several mediating mechanisms at work at different points in time, each of them contributing as small interconnected chains in a network of multiple mediatorships, ultimately resulting in the translation of a specific authorship.

### **Flanders Literature**

Cultural mediating institutions such as state agents play a central role in the shaping of transnational translation flows, e.g., by actively promoting literature at international book fairs and by granting translation grants that encourage foreign publishers to translate literature from other countries (Heilbron and Sapiro 2018; McMartin and Gentile 2020). The state agent Flanders Literature (FL), previously known as the Flemish Literature Fund, actively promotes children's literature from Flanders at international book fairs such as the Bologna Children's Book Fair and the Frankfurter Buchmesse. McMartin (2016, 50) describes the state agents from Flanders and the Netherlands as taking on "a 'double agent' role as [...] facilitators of culturally significant [...] translations and as market-minded 'matchmakers' mediating between source and target publishers to maximise the number of high-potential translations."

During the interview, Titusson recognised the importance of FL and its Dutch counterpart, the Dutch Foundation for Literature (DFL). He perceives them as not being commercial and therefore as trustworthy in discussions on certain authorships, which confirms the findings by McMartin (2016). Titusson further mentioned the opportunity to receive translation and marketing grants as important to him, including when it comes to publishing Moeyaert. FL also played an important role in establishing Titusson's personal contact with Moeyaert's German publisher, a relationship initiated when Titusson was invited to Flanders on a promotional tour for foreign publishers organised by FL in 2012. Titusson had just started Lilla Piratförlaget, and the matchmaking with the German publisher proved fruitful: not only did they discover a similar taste in children's literature, but Titusson was even invited to Moeyaert's home together with the German publisher. This sort of matchmaking is, of course, one of the main purposes of these trips.

Here we can clearly see that state agents fulfil an important mediating function, not only in promoting the literature of their language area and providing financial support, but also in bringing together publishers and creating mediating networks between isomorphic publishers (Sapiro 2016a), specifically, international publishers with similar interests and publishing profiles. The extent to which support from state agent FL contributed to the translation policy of publishers regarding Moeyaert's authorship in central and peripheral areas is discussed below.

**Literary prizes as a consecrating institution: The ALMA**

In his book *The Economy of Prestige*, James English (2005, 26) discusses the complex transactions involved in the awards industry, where not only do art and money play a role, but individuals and institutional agents of culture engage in the making of what he calls “value production.” This neatly fits the concept of multiple mediatorships, wherein several actors and institutions each play their role in the collaborative process leading to the consecration of an authorship. English discusses the prize frenzy of the twentieth century within the cultural field, where the establishment of prizes was constantly on the rise. This makes it clear that a recently established literary award such as the ALMA does not automatically gain attention within the global literary system, an observation we return to in our discussion of the ALMA’s position in the field.

The semi-peripheral position of Swedish is particularly interesting in the context of children’s literature on a transnational level. While the cultural image and symbolic capital of Swedish children’s literature towards the end of the twentieth century is still largely connected to the legacy of classic authors such as Elsa Beskow and Astrid Lindgren (Edfeldt et al. 2022), this symbolic capital was strengthened further by the establishment of a prize in honour of Lindgren. The ALMA is an award initiated by the Swedish government in 2002 given to a particular author, illustrator, or organisation contributing to children’s and young adult literature in the world. The first laureates were announced in 2003. As of 2024, there have been twenty-four laureates, of which four are international organisations that promote reading for children. The ALMA website states that by initiating the award, the Swedish government set out to “promote every child’s right to great stories,” “maintaining the highest level of artistic excellence,” and that it is “the largest award of its kind” (Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, n.d.-a). Furthermore, it is stated that the work of ALMA laureates is increasingly being translated, thereby giving children around the world more access to “high-quality literature.” The ALMA clearly profiles itself as a literary prize with high symbolic capital and consecrating power. Along with a substantial annual sum of tax-funded prize money, five million Swedish crowns,<sup>6</sup> the ALMA wants to signal “to the world that Sweden takes children’s reading very seriously” (Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, n.d.-b). The composition of the ALMA jury underlines the objectives of the award, which, as mentioned, is not just about literature. The jury of twelve consists of professors of education and literature, children’s rights experts, translators, authors, illustrators, and librarians. Finally, the ALMA is presented every year at the Bologna Children’s Book Fair, the annual meeting place for the international children’s literature publishing industry and a central outlet for the acquisition of

translation rights.<sup>7</sup> This points to a clear-cut strategy to attract attention from the publishing industry for the award and its laureates.

The question is, given that the ALMA does not come from the centre of the international cultural system, what function does it serve? As noted by Heilbron (1999, 439), “the core of an international cultural system has the highest status; it is carefully observed, followed and emulated.” One could argue that the Nobel Prize in Literature, which originates from the same semi-peripheral language area as the ALMA, stands at the core of the cultural system and is here being emulated by the ALMA. The Nobel Prize is funded by the fortune of industrialist Alfred Nobel and is awarded by the Swedish Academy, an independent cultural institution. In the case of the ALMA, the Swedish government takes on a particular role in the consecration of children’s literary authorships in the world. Interestingly, this award intends not only to promote children’s literature but also to safeguard the position of children in general. Here we see a convergence between aesthetic and humanitarian values when selecting a laureate. In the long-term perspective, the Swedish government is advocating for children’s rights and ultimately promoting itself as a humanitarian nation through an award of children’s literature in the name of Astrid Lindgren. To establish an international award means to take part in a global or transnational literary system and its markets of economic and symbolic capital exchange. Hence, for the ALMA, there is also a certain amount of political capital to be added to the equation.

Of the twenty award-winning ALMA authors and illustrators, nine come from (semi-)peripheral language areas, while the remaining eleven are from either the hyper-central language area of English or one of the central language areas of German or French. In the present situation, both peripheral and central languages are fairly equally represented among the winners, although authors from the African continent are altogether absent.<sup>8</sup> As a matter of fact, Moeyaert is the second laureate from the Dutch language area, a peripheral language area, the first being Guus Kuijer in 2012. In comparison to the Nobel Prize in Literature, which has yet to be won by a Dutch-language author, the Dutch language area is thus quite well represented when it comes to the ALMA. As mentioned earlier, only two of Moeyaert’s books had been translated into Swedish when he was awarded the ALMA. Clearly, the jury had made their decision based on reading his books in other languages. Also, the jury had issued translations into Swedish of Moeyaert’s work, which at the time was classified information. Interestingly, none of these translations have been published.<sup>9</sup> Broomans (2021, 30) mentions, however, that the translations of books that have been awarded national and regional literary prizes in the source area could stand a better chance of cultural transfer and might also benefit from a literary translation prize in the target language. Regarding

Moeyaert, he has received numerous prestigious national literary awards within the Dutch language area, in addition to the German Deutscher Jugendliteratur Preis prior to the ALMA. As mentioned earlier, he had also been nominated and short-listed several times for the Hans Christian Andersen Award prior to receiving the ALMA.

### **Transnational flows of Moeyaert's work pre- and post-ALMA**

According to FL, “it is fair to say that we have seen an ALMA effect at work: we have received many grant applications from foreign publishers who want to publish his books” (*Flanders Literature* 2020, n.p.). To scrutinise this claim, the translation database of the two state agents FL and DFL served as a tool to investigate the number of translations made of Bart Moeyaert's work. This database is suited to our objectives because it allows us to follow translation flows and to look into the number of translation grants issued, since this data is available for each title in the database. A search was performed on the author's name, which resulted in a list with all the translations included in the database. Nevertheless, the database does have limitations. For instance, subsidised translations are likely overrepresented because these are of primary interest for FL and DFL (see also *McMartin* 2020, 147–48). Sometimes it also contains preliminary records on translations-in-progress, which are then altered in the database at a later stage.<sup>10</sup> Some of these entries can be checked by performing a search on titles pending in the database (*Gracza* 2023, 251). The data on Moeyaert's translations were therefore cross-checked and completed with information provided by Karen Thys, a translation grants manager at FL, through mail correspondence. We further decided to look at the number of editions, not merely which titles have been published. We also included all genres, such as poetry, fiction for adults, and fiction for children, to provide a comprehensive overview of translations of Moeyaert's work post-ALMA. This gives a clearer indication of whether we can indeed speak of an ALMA effect in Moeyaert's case.

**Table 1.1** illustrates the transnational flows of Moeyaert's work pre- and post-ALMA from 1993 to 2024. It shows that his work has been published in 27 languages and 145 editions. Pre-ALMA, it was already translated into 21 languages in 98 editions, which suggests that Moeyaert's work was circulating widely in the global literary field already before the ALMA.

Moeyaert's work found its way into several new languages after his receiving the ALMA in 2019: Bulgarian, Croatian, Estonian, Serbian, Latvian, and Turkish.<sup>11</sup> These six are peripheral languages, and out of the sixteen editions published in these languages post-ALMA, only four did not receive any translation grants from FL.

Table 1.1 Editions and translation grants vis-à-vis Bart Moeyaert's work between 1993 and 2024, pre- and post-ALMA.

Language	Total editions (2024)	Post-ALMA editions	Translation grants from Flanders Literature <sup>1</sup>	
			Before 2019	After 2019
German	33	2	3	2
French	16	1	7	1
Italian	15	6	6	3
Spanish	9	3	3	2
Chinese	8	6	2	0
Swedish	8	6	1	4
English	6	0	3	0
Korean	6	0	0	0
Serbian	4	4	0	4
Norwegian <sup>2</sup>	4	1	0	1
Slovenian	4	3	0	3
Danish	3	0	2	0
Portuguese	3	0	0	0
Estonian	3	3	0	2
Croatian	3	3	0	3
Bulgarian	3	3	0	1
Afrikaans	2	1	1	1
Latvian	2	2	0	1
Macedonian	2	1	0	0
Polish	2	1	0	1
Japanese	2	0	0	0
Catalan	2	0	0	0
Greek	1	0	0	0
Hungarian	1	0	1	0
Russian	1	0	1	0
Thai	1	0	0	0
Turkish	1	1	0	1
Total	145	47	30	30

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Occasionally, a grant from the Flemish government has been included.

<sup>2</sup> The DFL database (Nederlands Letterenfonds, n.d.) does not mention whether the translations are in Bokmål or Nynorsk. However, the place of publication for the four translations is Oslo, where mainly Bokmål is spoken.

Secondly, it becomes clear that Moeyaert's work has a long-standing translation history beginning with a first translation into German in 1993 and thirty-one German-translated editions pre-ALMA. The first French translation of his work came about in 1999, and a total of sixteen French editions have been published since, of which only the latest appeared post-ALMA, in 2021. We can therefore conclude that Moeyaert was already established and consecrated in German and French pre-ALMA. As for

English, Moeyaert was introduced in 1998 and six titles were published between 1998 and 2008. Over a time span of ten years, these titles were acquired and published by the same publisher, Front Street. Moreover, this publisher is not considered a prestigious one in the Anglophone world, and no new translations have appeared since then.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that Moeyaert's work has not received much attention in Anglophone countries, before or after winning the ALMA.

Furthermore, as can be clearly seen in [Table 1.1](#), out of a total of 145 editions published over a time span of some thirty years between 1993 and 2024, 47 came about post-ALMA, in the period 2019–2024.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, thirty translation grants have been granted to post-ALMA editions, representing 64% of the total post-ALMA editions. This can be compared to the thirty translation grants awarded to a total of 98 editions pre-ALMA, amounting to only 31% of pre-ALMA editions. This suggests that, when compared to the pre-ALMA period, translation grants have become a more significant factor in publishers' decisions to acquire rights for Moeyaert's work. Some may even view the promise of a translation grant as prerequisite for publishing his books at all.

It is fair to say that the analysis of translation flows to two central languages, German and French, do not point to an ALMA effect. In both these language areas, translations of Moeyaert's work date back more than two decades preceding the prize, and the translation of his work into these languages seems to be an ongoing process, following a pattern of publishing his most recent works. Moreover, Moeyaert had already received the *Deutscher Jugendliteratur Preis* in 1998, which signals a clear (and early) consecration in the German language area.

Another interesting observation is that Italian holds the third place in [Table 1.1](#), with fifteen translations in total. Here it can be noted that six books were published post-ALMA, including second editions of *Broere* and *Het is de liefde die we niet begrijpen*, which were translated already in 2011 and 2001, respectively. The second edition of *Het is de liefde die we niet begrijpen* appeared in September 2019, just a few months after the announcement of Moeyaert's win. There appears to be a possible ALMA effect regarding Italian, although there already were nine translations pre-ALMA. For English, a hyper-central language, the last edition was published in 2008, so we can conclude that there is no ALMA effect at work.

We conclude this section by stating that the most striking ALMA effect seems to have occurred in peripheral and (semi-)peripheral languages: Chinese, Swedish, and the six 'new' peripheral languages mentioned above. Many of the post-ALMA translations in (semi-)peripheral languages also received translation grants from FL. Furthermore, [Table 1.1](#) reveals that there are several peripheral languages where no clear ALMA effect can be traced, as no new editions seem to have come about post-ALMA—e.g., Hungarian, Greek, Danish, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, and Thai.

## Conclusions

In this chapter, we sought to uncover the ‘making of’ Bart Moeyaert’s authorship within a Swedish and a transnational context. While consecrating authorities and institutions of power such as the ALMA and FL both provide symbolic capital—and in FL’s case also economic capital—for the transnational circulation of an authorship (McMartin 2020), our study uncovers the critical importance of interconnected networks of multiple mediatorships, providing a collaborative effort in order for an authorship to travel successfully within the literary (semi-)periphery. In the case of Bart Moeyaert in Sweden, besides the consecrating role of authorities such as the ALMA and FL, we specifically identified some central mediating mechanisms, such as the importance of the author’s self-mediation, German as an intermediary transit language (confirming earlier research on the circulation of Dutch-language literature in the periphery), and the Swedish publisher’s own network and earlier experiences.

When it comes to the question of the ALMA’s influence on the circulation and translation of Moeyaert’s authorship, there is no straightforward answer. Moeyaert was already a visible and consecrated author in several central and peripheral language areas before winning the ALMA, exemplifying what has been called the consecration-through-translation principle (Brems et al. 2020, 128; Damrosch 2003). It becomes clear, though, that the award has strengthened Moeyaert’s position and boosted the circulation of his authorship in some areas of the literary (semi-)periphery, but not everywhere. However, it is too early to be able to fully elaborate on the position of the ALMA within the global literary system, since it is a fairly new award. Although this award has most certainly drawn the attention of publishing houses around the world, its impact on the general reading audience is unclear. Our analysis does, however, clearly show the importance of financial support through translation grants provided by FL post-ALMA, in particular for more peripheral language areas, including the Swedish semi-periphery. This in its turn confirms earlier research about the importance of state agents for translation from the literary periphery and, more specifically, between language areas with asymmetrical positions and power, such as the Swedish and the Dutch ones, in order to “overcome the asymmetries” (Vimr 2020, 57).

## Notes

- 1 In recent years, the translation of European literary works, including Dutch-language literature, has also been supported by Creative Europe translation grants with the purpose of enhancing the circulation of European literature.
- 2 Most of Eva Lindström’s works are published by Alfabet.
- 3 The translation published in 2001 by Rabén & Sjögren was out of print.
- 4 Lilla Piratförlaget also obtained the translation rights for Jean-Claude Mourlevat’s work only after he won the ALMA.
- 5 Nomination lists were acquired from the ALMA secretariat.

- 6 Roughly 462,000 euros ([Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award n.d.-b](#)).
- 7 Analogously, according to McMartin and Gentile, the Frankfurt Book Fair is a key outlet for acquiring translation rights for other genres, especially fiction (2020, 7).
- 8 It should be noted, though, that the South African organisation PRAESA received the ALMA in 2015.
- 9 Olov Hyllienmark, translator, personal correspondence with the authors, December 16, 2020.
- 10 The data in our analysis is based on information gathered from the database retrieved prior to June 25, 2024.
- 11 Noteworthy is the translation of the 2023 anthology *Een boek voor jou* (A book for you), in which Moeyaert's work was published together with other prominent Dutch-language children's authors in Arabic, Kurdish, Persian, Somali, Tigrinya, and Turkish. This publication can probably not be linked to an ALMA effect since the multilingual anthology was published by Querido, based in the Netherlands.
- 12 In 2004, Front Street became an imprint of Boyds Mills Press.
- 13 Statistics for 2024 are preliminary; see limitations mentioned previously.

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## 2 An Acquired Taste? The Selection and Translation Process of Herman Koch’s Bestseller *Het diner* in Estonian

*Luc van Doorslaer*

Of all the target languages presented in this volume’s case studies, Estonian is presumably the smallest, with only 1.2 million native speakers. Furthermore, as it belongs to the Uralic languages, it is linguistically unrelated to the overwhelming majority of European languages, including its closest neighbouring languages, Latvian, Russian and Swedish. Only with its northerly neighbour Finnish is there a clear linguistic and cultural connection. Estonian can thus be understood as a doubly peripheral language, a position that inevitably impacts the situatedness of the language and culture and impacts translation-related flows, contexts and realities. Despite its double peripheral position (triple, even, if one also considers its geographical location from an EU-centric perspective), the Republic of Estonia has a well-developed language and translation policy, which is described in more detail in [van Doorslaer and Loogus \(2020\)](#). For instance, the Language Acts (1995 and 2011), the Development Plans of the Estonian Language (2004–2010 and 2011–2020) and the Estonian Foreign Languages Strategy (2009–2017) all include several laws relating to language use and language management ([van Doorslaer and Loogus 2020](#), 66). Translation is most explicitly present in the Development Plans, more specifically when “translation in court proceedings, translation of information provided to consumers, the promotion of translation studies, the development of CAT tools and machine translation, the training of interpreters and translators” (68) are mentioned in the context of the international representation of the Estonian language, academic studies or in the sphere of public administration. Most research, however, has often dealt with literary translation from a historical point of view. This is also the main focus of the project Translation in History: Estonia 1850–2010<sup>1</sup> at Tallinn University, which approaches Estonian translation history through a sociological lens and embeds it in a transnational cultural history (see, for instance, [Rundle et al. 2022](#); [Monticelli and Ahi 2022](#)).

The literary translation policy of Estonia, its (mainly state) agents, and translation flows are analysed by [Loogus and van Doorslaer \(2021\)](#). The primary state-supported institution that deals with promoting Estonian literature

as part of a broader cultural policy is the Estonian Literature Centre (ELIC). Traducta, one of the ELIC's programmes, encourages the translation of Estonian literature through grants for which both publishers and translators are eligible. The article analyses the selection criteria as well as the quantitative data of the Traducta grants for the period 2003–2019 and relates them to [Heilbron's \(2020\)](#) three circuits of diffusion to which translation flows contribute: the protected circuit of embassies and cultural institutes, the (relatively unprotected) circuit of the target-language culture and the target-language economy, and the circuit of international success. Unlike earlier research findings for translation flows out of Dutch, where “the German reception tends to be the most crucial” ([McMartin 2019](#), 171), the data of the Traducta policy indicates that the Estonian translation grants are more English-oriented and “avoid that semi-central detour and aim more prominently at the only hyper-central target language” ([Loogus and van Doorslaer 2021](#), 177).

Whereas [Loogus and van Doorslaer \(2021\)](#) focused on the circulation of Estonian literature in translation and the translation management side of Estonian literary translation policy, the present chapter focuses on translation *into* Estonian and studies the selection, production and lifecycle of a particular Dutch novel in Estonian translation in more detail. Such an approach has already been proven fruitful by [McMartin and Gentile \(2020\)](#); the reconstruction of the trajectory of one specific book or translation offers more qualitative refinement and “a relational, processual and cumulative perspective” (287). Thus, the current article can clearly demonstrate how translation functions as a social practice by displaying a tangible case, how it is socially embedded and entangled in power dynamics and is an example of (non-)consecration. [McMartin and Gentile \(2020, 273\)](#) note,

To account for these cross-field, relational aspects, we must place our object of enquiry within a larger analytical framework capable of understanding the lifecycle of a book from local creation to transnational production and reception. This entails examining the process of creation, production and reception both within and across that book's various material cycles in different languages, starting from the original and carrying through to its latest translation.

Part of such a trajectory and lifecycle of a novel in Dutch–Estonian translation will be analysed in the following sections.

### **The success of *Het diner* (2009) and *The Dinner* (2012)**

The novel *Het diner* was published in 2009, and by 2013, several media outlets in the Netherlands and Belgium reported that it had become the most translated Dutch novel in history,<sup>2</sup> with translation rights sold to

thirty-seven countries and for thirty-three languages. The novel's primary storyline revolves around two couples meeting in an Amsterdam restaurant and discussing over dinner how to manage a crime committed by their teenage sons.

The book sold over one million copies in Europe and over 300,000 in the United States. It was staged as a theatre play, and to date, no fewer than four film adaptations have been produced. The book's bestseller status was also supported by a successful image-building and branding strategy related to the book as well as to the author, Herman Koch. "His international success story consists of a series of good choices: good agent, good publisher, right buzz, good launch, and good media attention" (Bax 2021, 232). Based on his success in the United States, during travels worldwide, Koch is presented as a successful literary celebrity. In the twenty-first century, this also means he is presented as being among "writers who have earned both economic and cultural capital and who therefore are on top of the literary chain" (Bax 2021, 235).

Marketing and branding, the construction of an overlapping auto- and hetero-representation as a literary celebrity (in his own language area as well as abroad) and the emphasis on the combination of economic and symbolic capital all contribute to the international success of both Herman Koch and *The Dinner* (Koch 2012, 2013). Additionally, the economic success of the translation in the United States also seemed to have a uniting effect on the Dutch media. Whereas the original reviews of *Het diner* were generally, but certainly not exclusively, positive, after its success in the United States, the Dutch media often referred to the sales figures as an argument demonstrating the importance of the book and Koch's authorship more generally. It not only showed "that the public media are fascinated with success stories and success myths" but also illustrated how "economic capital *can* be turned into symbolic capital as well" (Bax 2021, 225). This can be stimulated by state actors promoting and translating literature, such as literature or translation foundations. However, in this case, it is related to a sort of national pride among private media actors, using sales figures to stress the international reputation of a peripheral language and culture. It is an illustration of the diversity in "the ways and modes by means of which cultural diplomacy is enacted" (Gentile 2023, 227), although rather an indirect one. Cultural diplomacy is usually considered a form of soft power related to the exchange of artistic or cultural knowledge. In this case, hard economic data such as sales figures is part of the justification for the enactment of cultural exchange or export.

Although *Het diner* and its English translation have extensively been discussed in media reviews, attention in translation studies has been minimal to date. An exception is a recent chapter by van Egdom and Kotze (2024), which examines reader reception and how translation is framed

as a concept in the reception. *Het diner* is one of the two case studies in the chapter. The study shows not only how the English translation of the Dutch novel is by some readers “used as a scapegoat for disliking a book,” but also how several other comments refer favourably to the translation, thereby seemingly “indicative of a consecrative effect of translation” (2024, 230).

### Situating *Õhtusöök* in the Estonian literary field

For the period 2000–2023, the translation database of the Dutch Foundation for Literature lists 66 translations from Dutch into Estonian, including re-editions.<sup>3</sup> For comparability, the data for the same period for Estonia’s neighbouring languages are as follows: 326 translations into Russian, 307 into Swedish, 110 into Finnish, 101 into Lithuanian and 29 into Latvian. The authors most translated into Estonian for that period are Annie M. G. Schmidt (8) and Toon Tellegen (4), both authors of children’s literature, and Hendrik Groen (4).

### *Pegasus*

Pegasus, the publisher of *Õhtusöök*, the Estonian translation of *Het diner*, published five of the sixty-six Dutch–Estonian translations that appeared in the period 2000–2023, all by different authors: Karel Glastra van Loon, P. F. Thomése, Betsy Udink, Carolijn Visser and, of course, Herman Koch. The bibliographical information offered by the translation database of the Dutch Foundation for Literature for these five translations is presented below, with the addition of Pegasus’s categorisation of each publication.

- Karel Glastra van Loon, *Kire vili* (2004, trans. and ed. Kerti Tergem); Estonian translation of *De Passievruucht* (1999) (The passionfruit), published with support from Literair Productiefonds (Dutch Literary Production Fund)<sup>4</sup>, categorised by Pegasus under “Fiction → Nordic series”
- P. F. Thomése, *Varjulaps* (2005, trans. Kerti Tergem, ed. Ilvi Liive); Estonian translation of *Schaduwkind* (2003) (Shadow child), published with support from Literair Productiefonds, categorised by Pegasus under “Fiction → Pegasus Small Series”
- Carolijn Visser, *Naised võõrsil* (2011, trans. Katrin Kern, ed. Kerti Tergem); Estonian translation of *Miss Concordia* (2006), published with support from Literair Productiefonds, categorised by Pegasus under “Documentary → History and Travel → Travel Memoirs”
- Betsy Udink, *Allah ja Eeva* (2011, trans. Riina Luik); Estonian translation of *Allah & Eva* (2006), published without support, categorised by

Pegasus under “Documentary → History and Biographies, Travel → Historical and For Knowledge-Seekers → History”

- Herman Koch, *Õhtusöök* (2015, trans. Kerti Tergem, ed. Katrin Kern); Estonian translation of *Het diner* (The Dinner) (2009), published with support from Literair Productiefonds, categorised by Pegasus under “Fiction → Foreign Fiction”

As a general publisher, Pegasus shows a profile with a diverse and broad catalogue,<sup>5</sup> containing 1,073 books: approximately one-quarter fiction, one-quarter youth literature and the remaining half of the publications divided between health, economy, entertainment, cooking, etc. Pegasus is also quite versatile in its image. In a self-introductory text on its Facebook page, it presents itself as a small publisher focusing on literary fiction but explicitly adds that it does not publish poetry. It also emphasises that a number of its books have become bestsellers. At the time the analysis was carried out in August 2020, Pegasus was the eighth-largest publisher in Estonia by titles published. Further, 88% of the books in the publisher’s catalogue were translated, an exceptionally high proportion for a publisher in a larger language market but not necessarily atypical for an Estonian publisher.

Figures 2.1–2.4 offer a visual representation of Pegasus’s catalogue. Whereas Figures 2.1 and 2.3 show the results per category, Figures 2.2 and 2.4 focus on the subcategories within the fiction category.

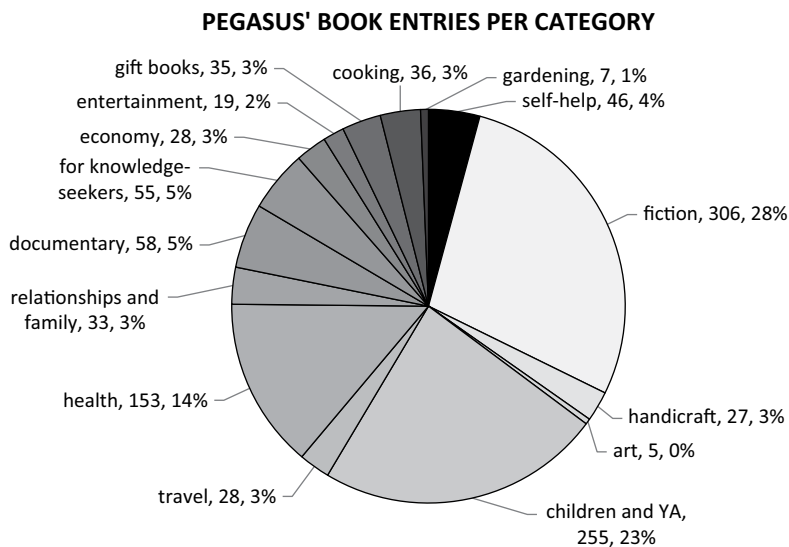


Figure 2.1 Numbers and percentages of book entries on Pegasus’s website per category.

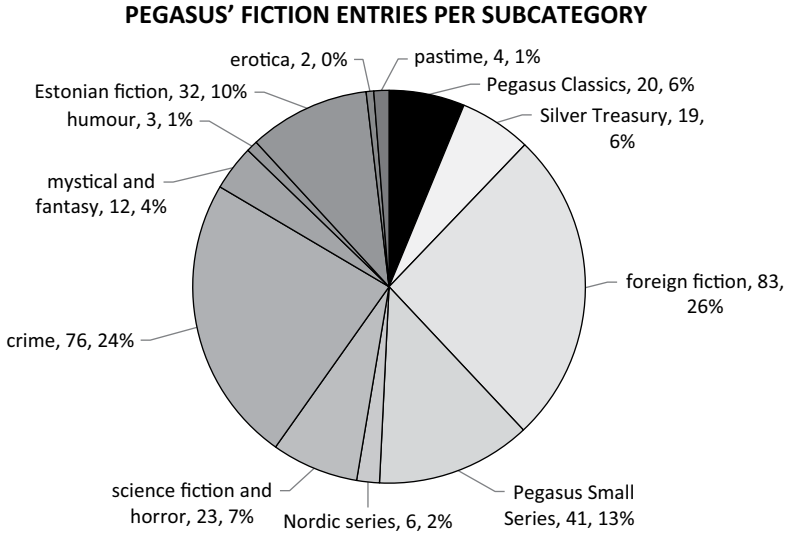


Figure 2.2 Numbers and percentages of fiction entries on Pegasus's website per subcategory.

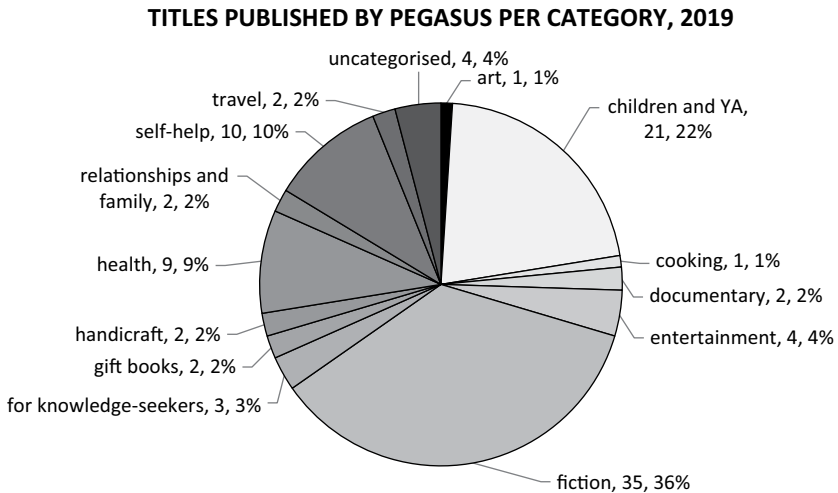


Figure 2.3 Numbers and percentages of titles published by Pegasus in 2019.

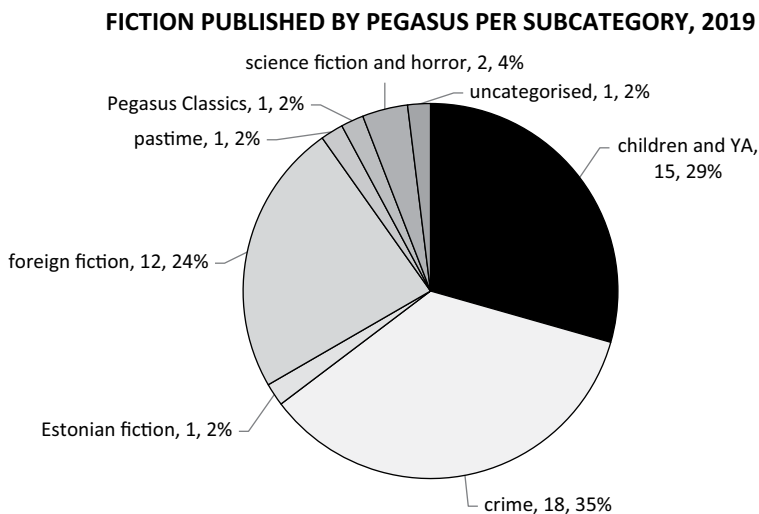


Figure 2.4 Numbers and percentages of fiction titles published by Pegasus per subcategory in 2019.

### *Selection and acquisition*

The information in the sections that precede the “Discussion and conclusion” section of this chapter is based on an extensive interview with René Tendermann, the Estonian publisher of *Õhtusöök*.<sup>6</sup> He explained how he first heard about the Dutch book through his contacts at a literary agency in the Netherlands. In the context of the Small Series of literary fiction at Pegasus, the agent recommended *Het diner*. According to Tendermann, the practice of relying entirely on personal relationships and recommendations is widespread in the publishing business, especially in and between more peripheral countries and language areas.

Publishing is, to some extent, still a guild business where relationships matter a great deal. And if the publisher is familiar, offers are made to them directly. And also, because in the Small Series, I published primarily European literature. However, to be honest, I had absolutely no idea about Dutch literature as a whole. And for such small—small for us—countries, it’s essential for us to have trustworthy recommenders.<sup>7</sup>

Since Pegasus is an independent publisher, it is obvious that economic and financial aspects play a significant role in publishing and marketing

decisions. The fact that the book was a bestseller in the Netherlands and beyond was a key argument when selecting it for translation. However, even more essential was the support of the Dutch Foundation for Literature:

Without this support, we definitely wouldn't have published this book, and even with the support [...], the book did not, in fact, earn back even what little costs the publishing house had to bear. [...] Without the support from the Foundation, the blow would have been even worse for the publishing house.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the interview, the publisher stressed that the economic aspects are vital, even more so than a possible cultural or literary added value. As long as the content or style does not threaten the series' image and reputation (which is broadly conceived anyway), it is acceptable. The Small Series focuses broadly on literary content from European countries but would, for instance, not include non-literary or sensationalist writings.

Another motivation mentioned by the publisher, albeit relatively unexpected given the literary profile of the series he managed, was the fact that at the moment of the possible acquisition, *Het diner* was being adapted for the screen by two separate production companies, one in the Netherlands and one in the United States. This was an important aspect that Tendermann used to convince the publishing house's editorial board, which has final say on new acquisitions, to purchase translation rights for the book: "These films were actually even more decisive when making the selection than the fact that it had been translated into some twenty or thirty languages at the time."<sup>9</sup> The argument was also supported by the fact that the actress Cate Blanchett was slated to direct the film, her first as a director, although plans later changed and Blanchett was replaced. Tendermann explains,

It could have become a very, very big film, and we really published the book in the hope of that. I think that the [Dutch Foundation for Literature] gives publishing support for the book only after [...] the translation rights contract has been entered into. From there, the publishing house can no longer backtrack. We had great faith, a steadfast belief that these two films [...] would also reach Estonia. That was the most decisive factor.<sup>10</sup>

### *Translation*

In the case of this translation, the publisher had already selected the translator, Kerti Tergem, and agreed on a timeline before signing the translation rights contract with the Dutch publisher. This was related to perceived

time constraints; the publisher wanted the translation to be ready no later than a year and a half after securing translation rights. Furthermore, for this specific language pair, Dutch to Estonian, the number of high-quality translators available was very limited (“two whom I would dare to use”),<sup>11</sup> so finding a suitable translator at an early stage was necessary to prevent timing problems later in the production process.

As to the translation rights, no lengthy negotiations were necessary: “The terms and conditions of translation rights of Estonian and Dutch books are really quite standard. There was nothing that could have come as a surprise.”<sup>12</sup> Also, because no other Estonian publishing house had shown interest in the translation rights, there was no competition. The average sum of the translation rights in this case is approximately €800–€1,000, and clauses additionally determine the percentages of e-book sales (usually 25%) and of the wholesale price of the book (usually 8.5%). This is indicative of the primarily symbolic nature of translation rights transactions between smaller language areas: for the original publisher, the financial reward is limited but there is a symbolic added value, in that selling translation rights allows them “to kind of tick in the box; another country added to the list of where the book has been published.”<sup>13</sup>

*Õhtusöök* was translated by Kerti Tergem, an experienced Dutch–Estonian translator with nineteen literary translations to her name, according to the translation database of the Dutch Foundation for Literature. Communication between the publisher and the translator was minimal; no instructions were given, and the translator’s autonomy was fully acknowledged. Furthermore, in Estonian publishing, the role of the editor is also essential and is often acknowledged in the translated publication. It is due to this intense interaction between the translator and editor that the publisher feels no need to intervene or supervise, as Tendermann explained:

As a publisher, I usually don’t prescribe anything to translators. They have to know these things themselves. I have the honour of working with good translators with whom it’s easy to cooperate. They know what’s important, the author’s style and the like. I had absolutely no need to tell Kerti how she should translate. She knows it very well herself. [...] [I]f books translated from Dutch only have two possible editors, then it’s likely there’s going to be very close cooperation. Katrin Kern, I dare say, is one of the best editors in Estonia. An excellent translator and an excellent editor worked together; I think it went very smoothly for them. I really cannot recall any disagreements.<sup>14</sup>

The translator also often contacts the author, not only with questions about the translation but also to stimulate interest in the book after

publication. For instance, Kerti Tergem participated in a panel discussion with Herman Koch during the International Literature Festival in Utrecht in 2017.

During the interview, Tendermann repeatedly returned to the lack of high-quality Dutch–Estonian translators. In his opinion, even a small increase in the number of excellent translators would create better prospects for Dutch literature in Estonian translation, although it has to be added that his reflections are hypothetical. There is not necessarily an opposition between literary quality and sales, for instance, and many contemporary literary works (including *Het diner*) might already be considered a mix of literary quality and more popularising elements, Tendermann explained:

I have thought of publishing quite a few crime fiction authors who are very popular in the Netherlands and also very popular in the European literary landscape, but it's been nipped in the bud due to a lack of translators. [...] The lack of translators more so causes the small percentage of Dutch literature in Estonia. If we had translators, many more Dutch books would be published, and then we would have a certain foundation on which to start building the sale of Dutch literature in Estonia. Right now, however, only three or four books are published a year, if that, and this is all very high-quality literature that doesn't sell well. And, well, that's the end of the matter for Dutch literature. If we had three or four translators who would translate slightly lighter literature, crime fiction, for example, or some women's fiction, which is also of excellent quality in the Netherlands, then it would be much easier to move forward. But we don't have such translators. We're stuck behind a closed door.<sup>15</sup>

### *The Estonian book market*

According to the publisher, book publishing in Estonia functions along vastly different marketing and image-building lines than, for instance, the film industry. In the latter, it is the norm to work mainly with two very different markets that are partly perceived as two distinct genres: European cinema and Hollywood. The situation is quite different for book publishing, where a “European” category does not exist. Here, “all books compete with powerful competitors from the UK and the US that determine the market of translated literature to an absolute extent—90%.”<sup>16</sup> Almost all other authors (Dutch, for instance, but also Italian and French) “drown there for the most part.”<sup>17</sup> As an example, Tendermann mentions Elena Ferrante, who is much more renowned worldwide than Herman Koch. Nevertheless, even in the Ferrante case, “book sales in Estonia [were] meagre, to say the least.”<sup>18</sup> Koch and Dutch literature in general were no

exception to that rule: “[I]n Estonia, sales of books translated from Dutch were—in all of the three cases I worked on—depressing.”<sup>19</sup>

In Estonian bookstores, there seem to be two categories that are sometimes marketed separately: Finnish literature, because of the linguistic and cultural proximity to Estonia(n), and the label “Nordic.”

For us, Finland and Sweden are neighbours of great importance, and we keep track of them, especially Finland. And I think that Nordic countries mostly rise to the forefront in crime fiction rather than in more substantial academic or, excuse me, rather than in more substantial literary fiction.<sup>20</sup>

In the case of *Õhtusöök*, no initiatives were taken to tailor the marketing of the book to the Estonian context. The cover art and font used on the cover were exactly the same as in the Dutch source text, and the blurbs appearing on the dust jacket were taken from two English-language reviews in *The Economist* and *The Independent*, respectively. In an indirect way, the choice of English-language reviews may also be an indication for the targeted audience—but such a reception approach was not part of this study.

It is common practice that new novels are sent to the editorial departments of magazines and newspapers in the hopes that they will be reviewed in their pages. However, in the small Estonian language area, only two or three newspapers still have a separate culture desk, so this practice has limited effect. As for booksellers, there are only two large-scale chains in Estonia, and they have long-term cooperation agreements with publishers, including Pegasus. The booksellers are sent information about upcoming books before publication and then decide autonomously how they will distribute them among bookstores and supermarkets. Publishers with their own sales department (such as Pegasus) can also sell their books directly. In Estonia, an average print run for literary fiction is 500 to 800 copies. Print runs of 1,000 copies are reserved for the most prestigious names. Crime fiction reaches a somewhat more extensive audience.

In general, in a country like Estonia, domestic literature remains far more accessible to promote and advertise. According to the publisher at Pegasus,

in the case of domestic literature, it’s much easier to organise presentations, isn’t it? The author can speak here and there. It’s much easier to market the book, much easier to advertise it. The author has acquaintances and such. Word starts to travel. Once word starts to travel, sales of the book rise. The sales will undoubtedly affect whether the book finds its way into newspapers. The publication of domestic literature contains a little less risk.<sup>21</sup>

## Discussion and conclusion

This study combined a quantitative analysis of bibliographic data on Dutch–Estonian translation flows, singling out translations published by Pegasus, with a qualitative analysis of an interview with Pegasus’s publisher. Although the interview data was limited to one participant, this participant played a vital role in the production process of *Õhtusöök*, our case, and has several years of relevant experience in the Estonian publishing field. Due to this crucial position, many valuable insights into the general background and considerations when publishing Dutch literature in Estonian were gathered.

In a concrete translation and publishing situation between two peripheral languages, there is no room for idealising or romanticising views about the quality of literary or cultural artefacts. Traditional literary criteria play only a relatively minor role; specific genres, such as crime fiction, are more appreciated if they also lead to better sales figures. The publishing world is a business like many others, where economic and financial survival are crucial. Within this context of a very pragmatic approach to cultural content, translation is mainly considered an extra cost, and the translator can be additionally valued as an agent potentially contributing to the marketing and promotion of the translation.

State-supported institutions such as the Dutch Foundation for Literature or the Estonian Literature Centre, aiming at translating and promoting their own so-called “national” literature, are aware of “the central role translation plays in shaping cultural images across national and cultural borders” (Gentile et al. 2021, 1). In this context, however, it is remarkable that the Estonian publisher hardly ever referred to any existing national or cultural image of the Netherlands, Belgium or the Low Countries. At first sight, the selection criteria in this case rely on an almost post-national approach without any clearly imagologically inspired motives. Nevertheless, there are several references in the interview to *European* culture, images or practices, mostly in contrast with *American*. This case study seems to indicate how literary translation between two relatively unrelated peripheral language areas tends more easily towards transnationality. Without clearly marked images—or, for that matter, clear knowledge—at a national or cultural level of a language, literature or country, larger categories at a cultural-continental level can replace those in a more binary representation: European vs North American.

A similar reduction to a binary interpretation can be perceived at the language level. Within sociological approaches to translation, Heilbron and Sapiro’s (2007) distinction between hyper-central, central, semi-central (or semi-peripheral) and peripheral language zones is often referenced. However, in the publisher’s analysis, translations in the Estonian literary publishing world are seen as consisting of the English language and the rest—without any significant distinction between central, semi-central and

peripheral source languages. Whether a book will be translated into Estonian from French (central), Italian (semi-central) or Dutch (peripheral) seems to depend more on the success of the English translation than on anything else. In this sense, René Tendermann's analysis of Estonian publishing practices aligns with Heilbron's (2020) remark in a later article. While other situations may still exhibit a polycentric structure, the Estonian language area's only centre is English.

When one compares translation ratios by language area, one may get the impression that writers from the periphery are more likely to be translated into another peripheral language area, since most translations occur from one peripheral language to another. However, this view obscures what is actually going on: what gets translated in peripheral languages very often depends on the selection that takes place in the centres. This is where international symbolic capital is accrued and distributed and where the most important hierarchies of prestige are formed.

(Heilbron 2020, 141)

The network of determining actors in the case of *Õhtusöök* is tiny. The literary agent recommends a book to the publisher, who then hires a translator under the condition that there is financial support from the relevant literature foundation. Both interactions are based mainly on an existing relationship of trust. Subsequently, the translation process is also guided by the contacts between the author and the translator. In such a small network of actors, small-scale initiatives can become more determining than consecration schemes. While consecration is usually based partly on aesthetic criteria and factors, this case study illustrates that economic considerations are by far the most dominant. In such a context with two peripheral languages that have only a limited amount of cultural and translation exchange, just a few individuals determine the existence or non-existence of a translation. Substantial research on the sociology of translation requires a "sufficient critical mass in economic, political, cultural, institutional, and even demographic terms, before they can be relevantly approached from the perspective of translation flows or translation policy" (van Doorslaer 2023, 259). The small scale of the translation selection and production network may jeopardise the relevance of more general statements about translation policy or translation flows in some peripheral-to-peripheral translation data.

Existing research on the circulation of translated literature usually relies on more complex network situations, including foreign editors, reviewers, academics and journalists. In the case studied in this chapter, such agents are not present in the network analysis. Also, potentially interesting

research distinctions such as demand-driven vs supply-driven translation (Vimr 2020) are hardly possible due to the limited data available. An interesting aspect, although not an agent in the strict sense, is the role of the expectation that the translation could become successful because of the movie(s). It illustrates that nowadays translations are an integral part of transmedial adaptation practices, since “[a]daptation constitutes the driving force of contemporary culture, with stories adapted across an array of media formats” (Murray 2013, abstract).

For future research, it might also be promising to connect some of the peripheral-to-peripheral facts to approaches related to the so-called spatial approach. Although Hofeneder (2023)—referring to Pym, Venuti and Simon, among others—applies the spatial view mainly to historical research, some of the questions and perspectives might also be relevant for translational exchanges that are determined by a minimal number of actors between peripheral language zones:

Where are the agents who enable translation? What places do they enter, and along which paths do they move? A spatial approach does not stop at identifying the exact geographic position. What is important is rather the spatial relationships between these whereabouts. Do the relevant agents meet in one and the same place? Do they work together? Or is there a spatial relationship characterized by exclusion, even to the extent that these agents do not meet at all? It is also of interest to note for whom a translation is intended. It of course makes a difference where a translation is initiated and where it is subsequently produced. Furthermore, the place of application influences the way a text is translated.

(Hofeneder 2023, 24)

The spatial approach allows researchers to study not only the lifecycle of a specific translation but also the lifecycle of cultural mediators such as translators or academics. Particularly in the case of peripheral language areas such as Dutch and Estonian, the relative importance of just a few individuals is high and also depends on the places where they work, live and interact, what Hofeneder calls their “high degree of proximity” (2023, 26). Especially in times of digital communication, such an approach may lead to exciting forms of interaction between cultural and geographical viewpoints and considerations.

Similar inspiration from Pym’s transfer maps can be found in Öztürk’s (2023, 90) chapter studying “the movement of people, knowledge, customs, practices, and positions of power” in the Ottoman empire. While such cases usually show a high degree of complexity, it would be important to see it applied to seemingly less sophisticated flows and interactions

between peripheral languages. Although they are more conventionally based on a language pair, the dominance of a few specific actors in the less developed (historical) interaction networks of knowledge could also reveal links between “*object transfers* (the movement of texts) and *subject transfers* (the movement of people who make possible the object transfers)” (Öztürk 2023, 90).

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## Notes

- 1 See <https://translationinhistory.tlu.ee/project/>
- 2 The most translated Dutch book is not a novel but Anne Frank’s *Het achterhuis* (*The Diary of a Young Girl*).
- 3 See <https://www.letterenfonds.nl/en/translation-database>.
- 4 This is the predecessor to the Dutch Foundation for Literature.
- 5 The complete analysis of the Estonian-language catalogue is based on the Pegasus website (<https://www.pegasus.ee/>) as of August 31, 2020. Project assistant Heike Olmre carried out the analysis and produced the visual representations of the figures.
- 6 The interview was conducted online in Estonian by project assistant Heike Olmre on December 15, 2020. René Tendermann has given his consent to the interview being used for research purposes and this publication. He also agreed with his name being used here.
- 7 All quotes from the interview with the publisher are based on the Estonian transcription of the interview and its English translation by Heike Olmre. Since it was an oral interview, some of the oral characteristics (repetitions, unfinished sentences) have been adapted for standardized written communication by the translator without changing the meaning of the utterance. Original text in Estonian: “Kirjastamine on mingil määral ikka tsunftiäri, kus suhted loevad väga palju ja kui teatakse kirjastajat, siis talle pakutakse otse. Ja kuna ma väikeses sarjas avaldasin peamiselt ikka euroopa kirjandust. Aga mul puudus tegelikult hollandi kirjandusest absoluutselt igasugune ülevaade ja nende selliste väikeste, meie jaoks väikeste, riikide puhul on hästi oluline, et meil oleks usaldusväärsed soovitajad.”
- 8 Original text in Estonian: “Ilma selle toetuseta me ei oleks kindlasti seda raamatut avaldanud ja isegi koos selle toetusega... see raamat ei teeninud isegi seda pisikest kulu, mida kirjastusel jäi kanda... [I]lma selle fondi toetuseta oleks kirjastuse jaoks see pauk olnud veel suurem.”
- 9 Original text in Estonian: “Need filmid olid valiku tegemisel tegelikult isegi määravamad kui see, et see oli tõlgitud tol hetkel mingi kahekümnesse või kolmekümnesse keelde.”
- 10 Original text in Estonian: “Sellest oleks võinud tulla väga-väga suur film ja selles lootuses me andsime ikkagi selle raamatu välja. Ma arvan, et fond annab

- raamatu väljaandmiseks toetust alles siis [. . .] kui on tõlkeõiguste leping sõlmitud. Sealt ei oleks kirjastusel enam tagasiteed olnud. Meil oli väga suur, väga kindel usk selsesse, et need kaks filmi [. . .] tulevad Eestisse ka. See oli ikkagi kõige otsustavam asi.”
- 11 Original text in Estonian: “kaks, keda mina julgeksin kasutada.”
  - 12 Original text in Estonian: “Eesti ja hollandi raamatute tõlkeõiguste tingimused on ikkagi suhteliselt standardsed, et seal oli mitte mingisugust sellist asja, mis võiks üllatusena tulla.”
  - 13 Original text in Estonian: “lihtsalt selline linnukene pluss [veel] üks riiki, kus see raamat on avaldatud.”
  - 14 Original text in Estonian: “Kirjastajana ma üldiselt tõlkijatele midagi ette ei kirjuta. Nad peavad ise teadma. Mul on au tõlkida ikkagi heade tõlkijatega ja hea koostööd teha. Eks nad teavad, mis asi on oluline. Autori stiil ja nii edasi. Kerti puhul mul ei olnud mingit tarvidust öelda, kuidas ta peab tõlkima. Ta teab seda ise väga hästi.”
  - 15 Original text in Estonian: “Ma olen mõelnud välja anda väga mitut Hollandis väga populaarset ja... sellise euroopa kirjandusmaatikul väga populaarset krimiautorit, aga see jääb tõlkijate taha.... Hollandi kirjanduse väike osakaal Eestis on pigem selle taga et meil ei ole tõlkijaid. Kui meil oleks tõlkijaid, siis Hollandist ilmuks palju rohkem raamatuid ja siis oleks võimalik ka mingi pinna pealt hakata üles ehitama sellist hollandi kirjanduse müüki Eestis. Praegu ilmub kolm neli raamatut aastas, kui sedagi, mis on kõik väga kõrge kvaliteediga kirjandus, mis ei müü. Ja noh sellega ongi hollandi kirjanduse jutt lõppenud. Kui meil oleks kolm neli tõlkijat, kes tõlgiks natukene kergemat kirjandust, näiteks krimi või mingeid naistekaid, mis on Hollandis ka väga heal tasemel, siis oleks palju lihtsam edasi liikuda. Aga tõlkijaid meil ei ole. Siis me seisame sellise kinnise ukse ees.”
  - 16 Original text in Estonian: “Raamatute puhul võistlevad kõik raamatud ikkagi väga tugevate konkurentidega Inglismaalt ja Ameerikast, mis määravad tõlkekirjanduse turgu absoluutselt 90%.”
  - 17 Original text in Estonian: “upuvad seal peamiselt.”
  - 18 Original text in Estonian: “Eestis [oli] müük ikkagi pehmelts öeldes kehv.”
  - 19 Original text in Estonian: “[H]ollandi keelest tõlgitud raamatute müük Eestis oli ikkagi kõigil kolmel näitel mis mina tegin, masendavad.”
  - 20 Original text in Estonian: “Soome ja Rootsi on ikkagi meie jaoks niivõrd olulised naabrid, keda jälgitakse—eriti Soome. Soome ja Põhjamaad, ma arvan, tulevad välja pigem ikkagi krimikirjanduses kui nüüd selline tõsisem akadeemiline või, vabandust, tõsisem väärtkirjandus.”
  - 21 Original text in Estonian: “Omaraamatute puhul on ju palju lihtsam teha esitlusi. Kirjanik saab sõna siin-seal ja kolmandas kohas. Seda on palju lihtsam turundada. Reklaami raamatule on palju lihtsam teha. Autoril on mingisugune tutvuskond, sõna hakkab liikuma, sõna kaudu raamatute müük. Raamatu müük mõjutab kindlasti seda, kas raamat leiab tee ka ajaleheveergudele. Omaraamatu avaldamine on natuke riskivabam.”

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### 3 Divine Interventions? Harry Mulisch's *De ontdekking van de hemel* in Czech

*Veronika Horáčková and Wilken Engelbrecht*

Harry Mulisch is considered by Dutch literary historians to be one of the three great post-war Dutch authors (alongside Willem Frederik Hermans and Gerard Reve), and *De ontdekking van de hemel* (The discovery of heaven) is widely considered to be his magnum opus. The book appeared in 1992, on the front end of a period in Mulisch's career, from 1982 to 2010, that would see his canonisation at home and the consolidation of his status as a writer of international acclaim abroad. However, this upward trajectory is difficult to calibrate with Mulisch's eclectic oeuvre. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Mulisch was seen as a typical leftistish *auteur engagé*. After 1972, he entered a new, experimental phase, devoting himself to poetry and novels based on classical mythology and philosophy, works that garnered scant critical and commercial success. Starting in the 1980s, he turned to writing historical novels, focusing on questions of guilt and historicity. He developed a lucid writing style, typified in *De aanslag* (1982; The assault), which describes the post-trauma life of the lone survivor of a heinous act of Nazi retaliation in occupied Haarlem. According to Mulisch's obituary in the *New York Times* (Simons 2010, n.p.), the book, which has been translated into thirty-two languages, "made his reputation at home and abroad." The film adaptation, *The Assault* (directed by Fons Rademakers), won the 1986 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

*De ontdekking van de hemel* follows in the wake of this success and marks yet another shift in Mulisch's thematic repertoire. The dark, sprawling, philosophical novel plays with the idea of time and is based on the premise that the stone tablets upon which the Ten Commandments are etched must be returned to heaven and the pact between God and mankind must be broken. Angels preordain a man, Quinten, for this mission—and he succeeds.

The Czech translation of Mulisch's *De ontdekking van de hemel* was published in 2010 as *Objevení nebe* (translated by Ter Harmsel Havlíková), eighteen years after the Dutch original. In this chapter, we discuss

the coming-into-being of the translation, exploring why it appeared when it did, even as many of Mulisch's other works were translated into Czech much sooner. The book's translation history demonstrates that its international dissemination, while widespread, unfolded unevenly: its arrival into Czech came relatively late compared to translations in the Western European languages, for instance, but reasonably contemporaneously with translations into other East-Central European languages such as Polish (2006), Slovak (2006), Hungarian (2008), or Croatian (2008). As of 2025, the book has been translated into eighteen languages.

Before turning to our case study, we first provide an analysis of Dutch-language literature into Czech from a historical perspective: What position does Dutch-language literature occupy in the Czech literary field? What is the place of Mulisch and his oeuvre within it? What cultural capital does his work, and especially this novel, bring to the Czech literary system?

### Dutch–Czech literary transfer: A brief history

Literary translations from Dutch into Czech have a relatively long tradition, dating back to 1845. Thanks to the existence early on of translators who specialised in Dutch, the number of translations during the twentieth century was relatively large, culminating in as many as forty translations during the years 1945–1948, a period when parliamentary democracy had been restored after the German occupation and censorship had been abolished. In terms of genre, the books translated during these years were in line with pre-war translations (Engelbrecht 2018, 132–34). Popular novels by bestselling Dutch-language writers such as the Flemings Stijn Streuvels, Felix Timmermans, and Gerard Walschap or the Dutch Antoon Coolen, Johan Fabricius, and Madelon Székely-Lulofs were generally translated. The Czech translation of *Max Havelaar*, published in 1947, introduced Czech readers to the most important work of nineteenth-century Dutch literature—an anti-colonial novel originally written in 1860 by Multatuli, the pen name of Eduard Douwes-Dekker (Engelbrecht 2011, 6, 21–23). Indeed, *Max Havelaar* is widely considered by Dutch literary historians to be the most important work of Dutch literature of all time (van den Berg 2009, 439).<sup>1</sup>

Alongside the pre-war publishing houses such as Melantrich, Družstevní práce (Cooperative Labour), and Sfinx/Bohumil Janda, newly established publishing houses like Práce (Labour), the publishing house of the Revolutionary Trade Unions (ROH), and Svoboda (Freedom), the publishing house of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ), began to play a role in Dutch–Czech literary transfer in this period. For instance, *Max Havelaar* appeared in 1947 as the first volume in Svoboda's prestigious series *Knihovna klasikové* (Library of Classics) (Engelbrecht 2018, 133–34; for Multatuli's reception in the former Czechoslovakia, see Engelbrecht 2011).

*The communist takeover*

After the takeover of power by the KSČ in February 1948, all publishing houses were nationalised in April 1949. Most of the old publishing houses were dissolved and merged into large conglomerates. This created the houses that dominated the Czech literary landscape until the 1990s: Československý spisovatel (Czechoslovak Writer), SNKLHU (State Publishing House for Beautiful Literature, Music and Art) and SNDK (State Publishing House for Children's Books).<sup>2</sup> (SNKLHU was renamed Odeon in 1966. Odeon is the publisher discussed in our case study below.) Alongside these, two older publishers, Melantrich and Vyšehrad, remained as houses of the so-called bloc parties, the social-democratic ČSS and the Christian-democratic ČSL, as Czechoslovakia was formally a pluralist democracy and not a one-party state. After the Second World War, the publishing houses of KSČ-affiliated organisations established the already mentioned *Práce* and *Svoboda*, while *Mladá fronta* (The Young Frontier), the publishing house of the Youth Union, and *Naše vojsko* (Our Army), the publishing house of the People's Army, completed the field (Engelbrecht 2018, 135–36). The logic behind this *resortisace* (restructuring) was that each of the new semi-state conglomerates would cover a specific part of the book market.

In the first years of the new regime, the number of translated works fell dramatically. The heavy emphasis on Socialist Realism as the only permissible stylistic orientation and on translations of Soviet literature hindered the presentation of “capitalist” literature (including Dutch literature) to Czech readers. However, in addition to works by the communist writers Nico Rost and Theun de Vries, another work by Multatuli, his *Woutertje Pieterse*, incidentally presented as fitting into Socialist Realism, did come out during these years (Engelbrecht 2018, 137). An important element regulating literary production was censorship, especially the HSTD (Main Administration of Press Supervision) established in 1953 on the model of the Russian Glavlit<sup>3</sup> (Smolka Fruhwirtová 2011, 39). The existence of the HSTD was kept strictly secret because the constitution officially guaranteed press freedom and forbade censorship (Rundle et al. 2022, 21).

Following Khrushchev's criticism of the personality cult at the twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR in February 1956, there was a certain thawing of literary transfer in Czechoslovakia. This roughly coincided with the beginning of the activities of Olga Krijtová (1931–2013), who was both a literary translator and a lecturer of Dutch at Charles University in Prague. Moreover, she had good contacts with the editors of the magazine *Světová literatura* (World literature) and with the editorial boards of the publishing houses Československý spisovatel, SNKLHU, and SNPL (State Publisher for Political Literature).<sup>4</sup> Thus,

Krijtová was able to translate a Dutch classic such as *Het fregatschip Johanna Maria* (1928–1929; *The Johanna Maria*) by the neo-romantic author Arthur van Schendel, published in Czech as *Fregata Johanna Maria* in 1959, and the then-new novel *De Nacht der Girondijnen* (1957; *Night of the Girondists*), by the Jewish writer and historian Jacques Presser, published in Czech as *Noc Girondistů* in 1963. Additionally, Krijtová also translated several novels by the communist writer Theun de Vries, with whom she was friends.

In the eyes of the communist government, literature was a powerful tool to educate the masses. The ideologues of Socialist Realism, in Czechoslovakia led by Zdeněk Nejedlý, the first post-war minister of education, were convinced of the necessity to improve the aesthetic taste and moral values of the working class by introducing them to quality belles-lettres. That is, readers needed to be introduced to the highlights of world literature (Rundle et al. 2022, 20). This was in line with what Gisèle Sapiro (2018, 168) calls the instrumentalist view of internationalism in communist ideology, and it was the idea behind the World Literature series set up by Maxim Gorky in 1918, and of similar series in the other countries of the bloc. This ideological framework also shaped which literary genres were deemed acceptable for translation. The Prague Spring made it possible to resume translation of works from “bourgeois” genres effectively banned after the 1948 communist takeover, such as regional novels and crime stories (Engelbrecht 2018, 140–142; Smolka Fruhwirtová 2011, 47–49).

Dutch-language literature was acceptable because many of its writers were progressive-minded intellectuals and thus fit the narrative of a socialist world literature the ideologues wished to present to Czech readers. Books by such authors appeared alongside those of late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century canonical authors like Louis Couperus and Willem Elsschot. Most of these novels conveyed a critical undertone towards capitalist society, such as Couperus’s *Van oude mensen, de dingen die voorbijgaan* (1906; *Old people and the things that pass*), published in Czech in 1974 as *Co dávno odnesl čas* (translated by Olga Krijtová<sup>5</sup>), as well as Willem Elsschot’s *Kaas* (1933; *Cheese*), published in Czech in 1977 as *Sýr* (translated by Lída Faltová).

### *Mulisch in Czech translation up to 1989*

Harry Mulisch was born on July 29, 1927 in the Dutch city of Haarlem. His father was an Austrian-Hungarian officer from Northern Bohemia; his mother, the daughter of a Jewish banker from Antwerp. After his debut novel *Archibald Strobalm* (1952), his most important novel was *Het stenen bruidsbed* (1959; *The stone bridal bed*), in which he described the February 1945 bombing of Dresden from the viewpoint of an American

bomber pilot. In this novel, Mulisch addressed the issue of guilt for the first time—the bombing was carried out to stop the Nazis, but at the same time was a war crime that caused many innocent victims. The question of guilt would become one of the main themes in Mulisch's oeuvre. The only translation of this seminal novel in the Eastern Bloc was the Slovak *Kamenné svadobné lôzko* (1968), translated by Júlia Májeková, the chief editor of the Slovak publishing house Tatran. Between 1966 and 1972, Mulisch entered an outspokenly progressive period, which included a 1968 visit to Cuba where he met Fidel Castro. This political engagement helped position him as a suitable figure for inclusion in the Socialist Realist narrative.

In the same year, however, the tanks of the Warsaw Pact put an end to the Prague Spring, destroying the illusion of the communist political class as fulfilling a real leading role in society. In response, participants in the cultural field were made to choose between accommodation or dissent (Pop 2018, 135). In protest against the occupation, Krijtová returned her party membership and as a result received a publication ban in 1971; it was never lifted, although it was no longer strictly enforced from around 1975 onwards. Since her employer, Charles University, could not do without her as a lecturer, she was allowed to continue teaching, but her habilitation procedure, necessary to become a professor, was halted.

The first Czech translations of Mulisch's work were of the novella *Wat gebeurde er met sergeant Massuro?* (1957; What happened to Sergeant Massuro?) and the story "De grens" (1976; The frontier) (Krijtová 1985). The short stories were translated by Krijtová's students Jitka Hronová and Marta Nouzová (Mulisch 1985a, b), with an introduction by Krijtová. They were published in June 1985 in an issue of *Světová literatura* dedicated to anti-war stories. In a certain sense, the stories reflect the feelings of Czech society in that time. In the first story, Sergeant Massuro is in the last Asian Dutch colony of New Guinea. Inwardly unable to stomach the orders he is duty bound to carry out as a soldier, he falls ill and dies. After his death, it is revealed that he is literally petrified from the inside due to his remorse. In the second story, a couple's car crashes in the Norman's land between two countries. Neither country intervenes, resulting in the wife lying injured in a meadow for weeks. Finally, her despondent husband writes a desperate letter to the queen. Both stories can be read as a commentary on the absurd situation ordinary people find themselves in when authorities behave inhumanely, a problem Czechoslovakians faced very often at the time. However, Krijtová chose to present Mulisch in her introduction to the translations as a friend of Cuba and a progressive writer addressing problems of peace and war. She mentioned the Slovak translation of his novel *Het stenen bruidsbed*, and his novel *De aanslag* (1982), which she would translate to Czech one year later for Svoboda,

the publishing house of the Communist Party (the KSČ), under the title *Atentát*, with a (rather sizeable) print run of 18,500 copies. Mulisch was thus presented during the socialist regime as a progressive anti-war writer, being in a certain sense a fellow-traveller of the regime. Czech readers used to reading between the lines, however, understood his critique of life's absurdities.

### *Trends after the Velvet Revolution*

On the one hand, the Velvet Revolution of November 17, 1989, meant a liberation for the book market, as censorship was abolished and state restrictions were lifted. On the other, the elimination of all regulation and the rather hasty privatisation of state-owned corporations, including all publishing houses, created an outright Wild West-like situation. Or, as Lilliana Pop (2018, 136–37) stated, “capitalism without capitalists” emerged, with managers of former state enterprises being in the best position to solidify gains. While there were only 45 publishing houses in 1989, the number soared to 1,080 by 1991 and to 4,875 by 2010. The number of titles published exploded as well: whereas 3,767 titles were published in 1989, by 1991 this had almost doubled to 6,051 (Smolka Fruhwirtová 2011, 66–68; see also Havlíková 2004). During this period of wild privatisation, Mulisch's novel *Twee vrouwen* was published in Czech translation (Mulisch 1993a) as well as in Slovak (1993b).

Of the publishing houses that had regularly published Dutch-language works in translation before 1989, only the youth book publisher Albatros and the houses *Mladá fronta* and *Vyšehrad* survived. Odeon went bankrupt, as did *Československý spisovatel*, *Melantrich*, *Práce*, and *Svoboda*, but Odeon's imprint was taken over in 2000 by the Euromedia Group, founded in 1994. In addition, several smaller publishing houses founded after 1989, such as *Argo*, *Dauphin*, *Dybbuk*, *Paseka*, and *Triáda*, also publish Dutch-language works in Czech translation from time to time (Horáčková and Kostecká 2021).

### *The 2000s onward*

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, publishers began merging into clusters or were bought out by stronger players in the market. At present, the two dominant groups are Albatros Media, with sixteen imprints (including *Mladá fronta*, which has published several translations of Mulisch's works),<sup>6</sup> and Euromedia, with twelve imprints, including the resurrected publisher Odeon (Auer et al. 2023, 17), publisher of the book we discuss in the case study, *Objevení nebe*.<sup>7</sup> Since 2011, the SČKN (Association of Czech Booksellers and Publishers) publishes a yearly survey of the Czech book market.

According to their data, between 15,000 and 16,000 titles are published each year (Auer et al. 2023, 12). The share of translated titles is growing slowly but steadily: in 2010 it was 36%; in 2020, 38%; in 2022, 40%, of which more than half were translated from English. Dutch-language literature has a small but relatively stable niche position. On average, some 30–45 titles are translated (of which some 12–15 works of literary fiction or literary non-fiction) from Dutch each year, or 0.5% of all foreign titles,<sup>8</sup> split equally between works of literature and children’s books.<sup>9</sup>

Since 1994, translations of Dutch-language literature into Czech and Slovak have been systematically supported by the Dutch Foundation for Literature (Nederlands Letterenfonds) and Flanders Literature (Literatuur Vlaanderen), two agencies attached to the governments of the Netherlands and Flanders, respectively (Havlíková 2004, 28).<sup>10</sup> In recent decades, the two literature foundations have especially promoted books by promising young authors, which are then pitched to foreign partners at international book fairs, the most important of which is the Frankfurt Book Fair (Halbertsma 2006; Havlíková 2004, 30; McMartin 2021; Van Baelen 2006, 51). State-supported translation circuits of this kind have been described by Ondřej Vimr as “supply-driven” (2019, 51–52, 59–60), mentioning the translation subsidies of the Dutch and Flemish foundations as typical of policies designed to counteract the domination of English on the world book market (Pop 2018, 174; cf. Heilbron and Sapiro 2018, 189–94). On average, some 75% of Dutch–Czech translated literary fiction, 50% of non-fiction books, and 40% of children’s books are financially supported by the Dutch and Flemish literature foundations (Horáčková 2023, 89, Table 3.3). All Czech translations of Mulisch’s work have received financial support from the Dutch Foundation for Literature or one of its predecessors.

Three aspects of the brief history discussed above are particularly relevant for the case study that follows in the second half of this chapter. First among these is the person of Olga Krijtová, who trained a whole generation of Dutch–Czech translators who have continued the work she initiated in the late 1950s. Of these translators, Veronika ter Harmsel Havlíková, the translator of *Objevení nebe* (see further), is by far the most important. (In recent years, several graduates from the Dutch departments in Brno and Olomouc have also begun careers as literary translators.)<sup>11</sup> A second aspect is the support of the Dutch Foundation for Literature. Without it, many Dutch–Czech translations, among them likely also *Objevení nebe*, would never have come to be. A third aspect is the inter-field relationship between the German and Czech translation markets. As was the case in the late nineteenth century and in the interwar period, the Czech market seems to respond to developments in the German market: a book that has been translated into German and had success there is much more likely to be appraised as desirable in the eyes of Czech publishers.

### The making of *Objevení nebe*

Having situated Mulisch's oeuvre in the Czech literary field, in this section we discuss the circumstances surrounding the coming-into-being of *Objevení nebe*, the Czech translation of Mulisch's magnum opus, focusing the analysis on the translator and the publisher, and the various ways perceptions of prestige shaped the process.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Veronika ter Harmsel Havlíková*

In selecting Veronika ter Harmsel Havlíková as the translator for this work, publisher Jindřich Jůzl opted for perhaps the most accomplished Dutch–Czech translator working today, an indication of the special care he sought to take in bringing *De ontdekking van de hemel* to Czech readers. Born in 1972, Veronika ter Harmsel Havlíková studied Dutch and German at Charles University in Prague. She defended her PhD at Palacký University in Olomouc in 2013. As a translator, she is mainly concerned with contemporary novels. Among the Dutch and Flemish authors she has translated into Czech are Arnon Grunberg, Dimitri Verhulst, and Lucas Rijneveld. She also translates children's literature, non-fiction, and comics. She is an accomplished anthologist, having edited the poetry anthology *V Nizozemsku už nechci žít* (2007; I don't want to live in Holland anymore) and *Holandská čítanka* (2011; Dutch reader), an anthology of contemporary Dutch novelists. Apart from her work as a literary translator, she is active as an interpreter, editor, and mentor of early-career translators. She is the co-founder and vice-chair of the Czech association NE-BE, the Society for Dutch and Flemish Culture, and co-owner of Nederlandse Taal en Cultuur (NTC; Dutch Language and Culture), a company focused on translation, interpreting, and teaching Dutch. Like Krijtová, Ter Harmsel Havlíková has received several awards for her translation work. In 2001, she was awarded the Tomáš Hrách Prize for young translators from the Czech Literary Translators' Guild for her translation of Mulisch's novel *De procedure* (The procedure). She received the 2010 Josef Jungmann Prize, the most prestigious Czech award for literary translation, for her translation of *De ontdekking van de hemel*. In 2022, she was awarded the Dutch Foundation for Literature's Translation Prize for her entire translation oeuvre.

As for the translation itself, Ter Harmsel Havlíková knew that it would cost her a great deal of effort and time, forcing her to turn down other assignments. Odeon offered her generous financial terms and gave her more than a year to translate the book. The preliminary research phase was particularly time-intensive: she had to get acquainted with the theories presented in the book and familiarise herself with the political context in the

Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s. The translation was also mentally demanding, as it is a “dark book”<sup>13</sup>, as she stated in our interview. Less difficult was the translation of the title. According to the translator, the Czech title of the book, a literal translation of the original title, was obvious. She did not compare her translation with any existing translations, only occasionally peeking into the 2006 Slovak translation *Objavenie neba* by Adam Bžoch, but she stated that they chose different translation strategies. She did not contact the author, as Mulisch was already seriously ill at the time. According to Ter Harmsel Havlíková, the translation of *De ontdekking van de hemel* was a “marathon”<sup>14</sup> but she does not consider it her most difficult translation.<sup>15</sup> She emphasised her surprise at not being approached by Mladá fronta, the Czech publisher of Mulisch’s two previous novels, but rather by Odeon.

### *Odeon*

From the perspective of Jindřich Jůzl, who currently works as the director of Odeon, Mladá fronta’s hesitance to publish *De ontdekking van de hemel* in Czech presented an opportunity to snatch “an outstanding author and an acclaimed work.”<sup>16</sup> According to Jůzl, Mladá fronta’s world literature series, unlike Odeon’s, did not have a clear programme, and Mulisch’s previous works that had appeared in the series probably sold below expectations. This, in addition to the book’s extraordinary length (and corresponding translation costs), likely put Mladá fronta off on the title. However, Jůzl was willing to lean into this risk, citing the great prestige attached to the work and his perception that it would fit well in Odeon’s series for contemporary translated literature, Světová knihovna (World Library).<sup>17</sup> Works by renowned foreign authors such as Haruki Murakami and Michael Cunningham appear in this series, as do novels by Flemish writers Jeroen Olyslaegers and Dimitri Verhulst and Dutch writers Peter Buwalda and Joost Zwagerman. Odeon acquires translation rights to one Dutch-language book per year. For Jůzl, *De ontdekking van de hemel* was “a logical choice”<sup>18</sup> at the time. Ter Harmsel Havlíková held a similar opinion. She regularly writes reader reports for Dutch-language books Odeon is considering acquiring, but in this case, the publisher was confident enough in her endorsement to forego a reader report and sample translation.<sup>19</sup> At 752 pages, and published as a hardback, *Objevení nebe* is among the most expensive volumes in the Světová knihovna series.

Odeon has been among the leading Czech literary houses since 1949. The translation and production process for *Objevení nebe* was coordinated by Jindřich Jůzl. The designer of the cover is Pavel Hrach, and the introductory photo is by Jan Pohribný. The historian and Dutch studies specialist Iveta Coufalová served as editor (see [Křížová and Knap-Dlouhá 2021](#)).

Reflecting back, Ter Harmsel Havlíková called her collaboration with Coufalová “excellent”<sup>20</sup> and expressed appreciation that Odeon had selected a Dutch expert as editor for the project. As mentioned, according to Jůzl, the main reason for publishing the translation was the prestige attached to the work and its author.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Jůzl’s good contacts with De Bezige Bij, Mulisch’s Amsterdam-based publisher, were important for the transfer process, as was the support of the Dutch Foundation for Literature, with which Odeon has frequently cooperated. Jůzl stated in our interview that subsidies are always of great importance in his selection decisions. It is likely that translation support was particularly essential in this case, given the extraordinary length of the book. Jůzl noted his appreciation for this support, emphasising that translators also benefit. He described the cultural policy of the Netherlands as “excellent.”<sup>22</sup> A final notable aspect that shaped the mediation process was the novel’s previous success on the German book market. As we have pointed out elsewhere ([Engelbrecht 2018](#)), and as Veronika ter Harmsel Havlíková affirmed, a strong reception in German is often decisive in convincing Czech publishers to take on a Dutch book.

### The reception of *Objevení nebe*

The book featured an afterword written by the translator, author, and dramatist Ondřej Kavalír, who is also the director of the annual Prague book event Noc literary (Night of Literature). The inclusion of Kavalír’s text can be understood as an effort by the publisher to steer the book’s reception and is therefore revelatory of the publisher’s motivations and hopes for the book. By attaching Kavalír to the book in this way, Jůzl connects the book to a well-placed actor in the Czech literary field and signals the book’s proximity to him. Kavalír’s afterword itself in turn orients Mulisch’s magnum opus for Czech readers who are unlikely to know Dutch literature, placing the book in a broader context through comparisons to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and the works of Thomas Mann. Kavalír also emphasises the philosophical aspect of the book, e.g., by explaining the concept of gnosis (spiritual knowledge into humanity’s divine nature), which appears in the novel. The book’s paratext also includes a translator’s note, in which Ter Harmsel Havlíková explains Mulisch’s idiosyncratic use of upper- and lowercase letters for states and nationalities.

According to Ter Harmsel Havlíková, the Czech edition of *De ontdekking van de hemel* achieved good sales figures (on the Czech market, a literary title selling around 1,500 copies can be considered a success, she clarified) and was even reprinted. Jůzl confirms the good sales of the book. He adds that the book generated a great deal of reception relative to other translations from Dutch he has published. In his opinion, the novel and

Mulisch himself still resonate in Czech literary circles. Ter Harmsel Havlíková notes that the book was widely reviewed but has not received the attention it deserves. She attributes this in part to the lack of a coordinated promotional campaign, which she links to the author's death shortly after publication. In her view, sales results would have been better had the translation been actively promoted.

### *Reader reception*

If one looks at websites where readers can express their opinions about books, most reactions to the book are enthusiastic. *Objevení nebe* has been rated by 104 readers on Databáze knih (Book database), a leading Czech website for online book reviews. Readers gave it an overall rating of 88% as of January 2025. Twenty-four of the 104 online reviewers accompanied their rating with a written review, many of which speak in superlatives. User Anniee, for example, writes that she “devoured every word”<sup>23</sup> and admired the beauty of the language. LucieT describes the book as “a reader’s delight.”<sup>24</sup> Achilles refers to the book as “an incredibly engaging novel.”<sup>25</sup> For user Belatris, it was “a full, nourishing, funny and incredibly philosophically dense”<sup>26</sup> read. User LenysekC, on the other hand, criticises the novel because, for her, it lacked a clear plotline, while user Christo considers the book “uninteresting”<sup>27</sup> (Databáze knih n.d.). On Goodreads, where three Czech readers wrote a review on the translation, the overall rating is 4.17 out of 5 as of January 2025. User Tereza writes that it was “without exaggeration one of the best books”<sup>28</sup> she has ever read (Goodreads n.d.). User Ann (who is identical to Anniee from the site Databáze knih mentioned above) was enthralled by the book but admits that it is “a completely ungraspable book to rate”<sup>29</sup> (Goodreads n.d.). Reader Martina would have rated the novel five stars but because of the parallels with Dan Brown’s books, which she rates negatively, she gave it four stars (Goodreads n.d.).

### *Expert reception*

The book was also well received by professional Czech critics. Writing on the *Topzine* website for young adult readers, Tereza Tlachová (2010) compared the novel to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*—just as Kavalír did in his afterword to the novel (Mulisch 2010). Tlachová describes the plot of the story and states that two main lines can be followed: one philosophical and one narrative. She also states that the ending of the book reminds her of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, a claim made by a number of other critics. Tlachová notes that serious themes, such as euthanasia and the Holocaust, occupy a central place in the book and recommends the work to readers, giving it a rating of 90%.

Martina Vitáčková (2010), an expert on Dutch literature who, like Ter Harmsel Havlíková, defended her PhD in Olomouc, writes in a review published on the website *iLiteratura.cz* that *Objevení nebe* is “a literary construct that can equally well be considered a bizarre family saga, a work of popular science literature, science fiction or an apocalyptic vision.”<sup>30</sup> She describes the plot of the book and situates it in the context of Mulisch’s oeuvre and Dutch literature as a whole. She believes that the multi-layered nature of the book and the interweaving of fantasy elements with reality “is intellectually very attractive and stimulating for the reader, but also quite challenging”<sup>31</sup> (Vitáčková 2010). She concludes that it is certainly good that Czech readers can now get acquainted with the book.

In his review in *Lidové noviny* (The people’s daily), the journalist Jiří Peňás (2010) admits that it was not easy for him to read such an extensive and demanding novel but that he devoured several passages and that the book as a whole fascinated him. He describes the novel as “epically omnivorous, thematically encyclopaedic and philosophically ambitious”<sup>32</sup>, which at times seems almost unbearable (Peňás 2010). He situates Mulisch in the tradition of Thomas Mann’s philosophical novels and finds the comparison to Dan Brown unfair. While Brown is, in his view, “a jokey entertainer and hypnotist,”<sup>33</sup> Mulisch is “a solid literary author.”<sup>34</sup>

The only expert review that can be called negative is that of Ondřej Nezbeda, which was originally printed in the weekly *Respekt* and subsequently published on the *iLiteratura.cz* website. He faults Mulisch for a “preoccupation with his own ego and intellect”<sup>35</sup> (Nezbeda 2010), saying the book falls short of a “novel of ideas.”<sup>36</sup> Nezbeda (2010) compares the ending to *The Da Vinci Code* and considers it “stupid.”<sup>37</sup> For this reason, he does not recommend the book to readers.

In an instance of productive reception, an eponymous theatrical adaptation of *Objevení nebe* was performed by students of the theatre faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, premiering on April 22, 2016, and running through June 2017.

## Conclusion

One can only speculate as to why it took eighteen years for this major work by Mulisch to reach Czech readers. According to translator Harmsel Havlíková, the gap is indicative of the marginal position of Dutch literature in the Czech literary field and the unpredictable nature of literary transfer between these two peripheral literatures. As our brief description of Dutch–Czech literary transfer indicates, cultural mediators such as the translator and Dutch studies scholar Olga Krijtová and institutions such as universities and translation publishers have ensured

a limited but nonetheless continued flow of literary works from the post-war period to the present. However, as we have shown, these literary transfer circuits are contained within the political field, as reflected in Dutch–Czech translation flows in the pre-communist, communist, and post-communist periods. The role of the translator in each of these periods differs: in the pre-communist period and under communism, well-placed translators often selected the works they would go on to translate.<sup>38</sup> Today, in a publishing field characterised by conglomeration and economic rather than by political constraints, Czech translators have largely relinquished the selection of books to publishers, who have become dependent on support from state agents like the Dutch Foundation for Literature to co-finance translations. Our case study demonstrates that publisher Jindřich Jůzl was primarily motivated by the potential symbolic gains of publishing “an outstanding author and an acclaimed work”<sup>39</sup> that he perceived to fit particularly well in his catalogue. His decision to entrust the translation to the most accomplished Dutch–Czech translator working today, a former student of Olga Krijtová, underwrites the care he attached to the title, as does his willingness to take on the significant risk of financing a 750-plus-page translation (for which a translation grant was essential) and publishing it in hardcover. Strangely, this editorial care seems to have stopped with the publication of the translation, as there was no concerted effort to push the book to Czech readers beyond the paratextual endorsement of Ondřej Kavalír in his afterword. Nonetheless, the book’s generally positive reception among everyday readers and professional critics alike seems to be “the chance event that in hindsight proved necessary”<sup>40</sup> to the book’s success, as Gerrit Krol put it (van Uffelen 2006, 12).

## Notes

- 1 For its part, the Dutch daily *NRC Handelsblad* called Mulisch’s *De ontdekking van de hemel* “the best Dutch-language book of all time” (*NRC Handelsblad* 2007, n.p.), an accolade generally given to Multatuli’s *Max Havelaar*.
- 2 SNDK was renamed Albatros in 1969.
- 3 Главное управление по охране государственных тайн в печати, Main Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press.
- 4 SNPL was the name of publishing house Svoboda between 1953 and 1958. It was then renamed NPL (Publishing House of Political Literature) and in 1966 took its original name again.
- 5 Her name is not mentioned in the colophon, as she had a publication ban at that moment.
- 6 These are *De procedure* (Mulisch 2001) and *Siegfried* (Mulisch 2003), both translated by Veronika ter Harmsel Havlíková. She also translated an anthology of Dutch poetry published by *Mladá fronta*, which includes a poem by Mulisch (Mulisch 2007).

- 7 According to the book publication figures for 2022 (Auer et al. 2023, 12–13), out of a total of 15,342 titles, 6,109 were translated (40%), of which 3,309 from English and 925 from German. The Albatros Media group published 1,037 of them (6.7%), and Euromedia, 669 (4.4%). To compare: in 2022, fourteen titles were translated from Dutch (0.23% of all translations published in Czech).
- 8 Horáčková (2023, 88) gives exact figures of literary translations from Dutch into Czech for 2017–2021. For the period 1990–2003, see the list by Havlíková (2004, 30–31). The average for that period was five titles per year.
- 9 These figures were collected by the authors and are from the database of the ČNB (Czech National Bibliography).
- 10 Flanders Literature was formerly known as the Flemish Literature Fund (Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren) but changed its name in 2019. For more on the organisation, see McMartin (2019).
- 11 Speaking of Mulisch, the literary magazine *Plav* published an excerpt of his novel *Het theater, de brief en de waarheid* (The theatre, the letter and the truth) in a translation by Veronika Horáčková, who is associated with the department of Dutch studies in Brno (Mulisch 2016).
- 12 The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with Veronika ter Harmsel Havlíková on November 13, 2020, and with Jindřich Jůzl on June 30 and July 1, 2021. Information in this chapter regarding their role in the making of *Objevení nebe* is taken from these conversations. The interviews were conducted in Czech. English gloss translations are provided in the running text, with Czech transcriptions in the corresponding endnotes. All translations are by the authors.
- 13 Original text in Czech: “temnou knihu.”
- 14 Original text in Czech: “maraton.”
- 15 Ter Harmsel Havlíková considers her most difficult work to be her translation of Dimitri Verhulst’s *Godverdomse dagen op een godverdomse bol* (2008; Damned days on a damned planet), translated to Czech in 2011 as *Úprdelný dny na úprdelný planetě*. This is because it is a poetic prose novel in which rhythm and alliteration play an important role.
- 16 Original text in Czech: “skvělým autorem a ceněným dílem.”
- 17 According to ter Harmsel Havlíková, Odeon speculated that if Mulisch had died before publication or won the Nobel Prize, the book would have been published in the series *Knihovna klasiků* (Library of Classics), which publishes only the most prestigious works of world literature.
- 18 Original text in Czech: “logickou volbou.”
- 19 Ter Harmsel Havlíková added that the commissioning of reader reports from translators by publishers is common practice but that sometimes books she reviews positively are rejected and books she finds less interesting are acquired.
- 20 Original text in Czech: “výborně.”
- 21 The 2001 film adaptation by Jeroen Krabbé, *The Discovery of Heaven*, would have been known to potential Czech readers, or at least those who attended the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, where it was screened in 2002.
- 22 Original text in Czech: “výbornou.”
- 23 Original text in Czech: “hltala každé slovo.”
- 24 Original text in Czech: “čtenářská lahůdka.”
- 25 Original text in Czech: “neskutečně poutavý román.”
- 26 Original text in Czech: “plná, výživná, vtipná i neskutečně filozoficky hutná nálož.”

- 27 Original text in Czech: “nezáživné.”
- 28 Original text in Czech: “bez nadsázky jedna z nejlepších knih.”
- 29 Original text in Czech: “naprosto neuchopitelná kniha na hodnocení.”
- 30 Original text in Czech: “literárního konstrukt, který lze stejně dobře považovat za bizarní rodinnou ságu, dílo populárně-naučné literatury, science fiction nebo apokalyptickou vizi.”
- 31 Original text in Czech: “je pro čtenáře intelektuálně velmi atraktivní a stimuluující, ale také dost náročná.”
- 32 Original text in Czech: “epicky všezřavým, tematicky encyklopedickým a filozoficky ambiciózním.”
- 33 Original text in Czech: “jarmareční bavič a hypnotizér.”
- 34 Original text in Czech: “solidní literární firma.”
- 35 Original text in Czech: “zahleděnosti do vlastního ega a intelektu.”
- 36 Original text in Czech: “románu idejí.”
- 37 Original text in Czech: “přihlouplé.”
- 38 [Grave \(2001\)](#), discussing Dutch-language literature in German translation before the First World War, and [Rundle et al. \(2022, 23–28\)](#) discussing translation in relation to European communism, also stress the translator’s pivotal gatekeeping position during the communist era.
- 39 Original text in Czech: “skvělým autorem a ceněným dílem.”
- 40 Original text in Dutch: “Toeval dat na de gebeurtenis noodzaak bleek.”

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## 4 The Translator as a Cultural Tastemaker

### Samgis Zandi's Persian Translation of Stefan Brijs's *De engelenmaker*

*Nasrin Ashrafi and Elaheh Rezvani*

Translation has been a key component of intercultural dialogue between Iran and the rest of the world for centuries. The history of literary translation from Western languages into Persian dates back to the nineteenth century, when Iran underwent significant modernisation and cultural reforms. During this period, translation emerged as a key tool for cultural and intellectual exchange, allowing Iranian readers to engage with the ideas and literary works of the Western world. The translation of Western literary works into Persian not only introduced new literary styles and themes but also contributed to the development of modern Persian literature itself.

Although there is no comprehensive work on the full history of translation in Iran, numerous studies (Haddadian-Moghaddam 2014; Karoubi 2017) have investigated translation traditions and movements during specific historical periods, particularly during major political turning points. The history of translation in Iran has been significantly influenced by the country's social and political changes. For instance, the Arab conquest of Iran in the seventh century, the Iranian Constitutional Revolution between 1905 and 1911, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution are examples of socio-political shifts that profoundly impacted translation practices and trends within the country. Despite this long history of translation activity, research on translation in Iran is a relatively new phenomenon. Since a limited number of languages are offered in master's and doctoral programmes in Iranian universities, research on translation practice is mainly limited to these languages, including Arabic, English, French, Russian, and German. As a result, research on translating peripheral languages, such as Dutch, remains scarce.

To provide a clearer understanding of literary translation in Iran, two key aspects must be addressed: the selection of works for translation and issues related to translation copyright. First, regarding the selection of works, both Iranian translators and publishers play significant roles.

However, translators often exert greater influence in choosing which titles to translate. In contrast, publishers hold more authority over broader aspects, such as approving or rejecting translations, managing the editorial process, determining technical formats, handling distribution and promotion, and setting royalty terms (Haddadian-Moghaddam 2014). Second, concerning translation copyright, it is important to note that Iran has not signed any international copyright conventions since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The revolution and subsequent cultural policies reshaped the field of literary translation, disrupting pre-existing norms and practices. This shift was particularly evident in the lack of commitment to international copyright agreements, which allowed for the production of multiple translations of the same source text. Within Iranian public discourse, translation scholars, critics, reviewers, and journalists frequently regard the phenomenon of retranslation as a cultural crisis (Saeedi 2020).

In this chapter, we explore the contextual factors involved in the process of literary tastemaking. To this aim, we look into the production of the Persian translation of Belgian author Stefan Brijs's Dutch-language novel *De engelenmaker* (2005, *The Angel Maker*), translated by Samgis Zandi as فرشته ساز and published in 2021 by Amout Publishing House in Tehran. We focus on the importance of tastemaking as a practice that influences the diversity of the literary field, arguing for a social understanding of taste as socio-political, embodied, intimate, and personal. What is at stake here is how a translator can take a major role in cultivating a new literary taste. Drawing on Bourdieu's cultural tastemaking theory, this study puts forward translators as cultural tastemakers who not only mediate the space between the production and reception of Dutch literature as an emerging literary phenomenon in Iran's book market, but also reinforce cultural tastes and, therefore, habitus (Bourdieu 1984, 228). More broadly, we will discuss the translator's role as a cultural mediator between two peripheral languages, that is, Persian and Dutch.

### Conceptual framework

While Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital have been widely applied in sociological approaches to translation publishing (Bourdieu 1999a; see also Sapiro 2008), his insights on the international circulation of ideas (Bourdieu 1999b) and taste formation have been less frequently mobilised. In the case of Iran, where cross-border literary gatekeeping often occurs through informal networks, tastemaking emerges not primarily through institutionalised mechanisms in the publishing world but through the situated agency of individual actors, such as translators. This makes Bourdieu's theorisation of taste—understood as a relational, embodied, and socially conditioned practice—particularly productive for

analysing the micro-level processes that drive literary diversification and canon formation in contexts of cultural asymmetry and distance, such as that between Iran and the Dutch-speaking world. In his conceptualisation of the international circulation of ideas, Bourdieu (1999b) refers to the sociological formation process of cultural products. He believes the transfer process from a foreign field to a domestic one comprises a series of social operations. To him, these social processes are selection, labelling and classification, and reading and reception. Bourdieu (1999a) further explains that the process of selection deals with questions regarding what is translated, who it is translated by, and who publishes it. Labelling and classification are related to the presentation of a work, and the publisher is often the first to have a hand in this; for instance, the preface and the cover accompanying the published text are always meaningful labels mediated by the publisher. Finally, the process of reading and reception considers the difference between the reception field of the translation and that of the original.

From a broader perspective, the global literary system significantly influences how translations are produced, circulated, and received, reinforcing or challenging existing cultural hierarchies due to the unequal distribution of literary capital (Casanova 2004) and the geopolitical and cultural hierarchies that shape translation flows (Sapiro 2010). However, translating from one peripheral language to another within the global literary system often comes with significant barriers due to the lack of cultural and literary capital associated with both languages, resulting in limited visibility and circulation. This constitutes the central theme of the study, which is the formative role of translated literature in the recipient culture, where the translator acts as a cultural mediator and tastemaker.

Holistically, cultural and literary tastemaking is a multi-faceted process shaped by a variety of factors, encompassing both institutional and individual influences. On one level, tastemaking is shaped by the agents involved, which can be institutional actors, such as publishing houses, cultural foundations, and newspapers, or individuals like translators, authors, and readers, each of whom brings unique preferences and biases to the literary field (Bourdieu 1984; Childress 2017). Institutions wield significant power in determining what is considered high or popular culture, promoting specific narratives or genres based on organisational objectives, market dynamics, and the distribution of cultural capital. In contrast, individuals contribute to tastemaking through personal preferences and interpretive practices, which can challenge or reinforce institutionalised norms within the literary ecosystem (Janssen et al. 2011; Schwartz 1997).

Equally critical are the asymmetrical power relations and the position of languages within the global literary system, as the process of cultural transfer involves negotiating the values, norms, and expectations

embedded in each context (Casanova 2004). The degree of compatibility or tension between these systems influences how a work is framed, translated, and ultimately valued within the target culture, illustrating that literary tastemaking is not simply the transfer of texts but a process of adaptation that reshapes cultural meanings in alignment with local tastes and ideological frameworks (Even-Zohar 2021; Heilbron and Sapiro 2007).

Moreover, the dynamics of reception—shaped by the socio-historical context of the target market—are crucial in the process of cultural tastemaking. We categorise these factors into two types: hard and soft. Hard factors pertain to the material aspects, including market conditions, which influence the entire lifecycle of translations, from the selection process through production to eventual reception. In contrast, soft factors are closely tied to the ideational aspects of cultural production, operating in conjunction with the material conditions and shaping how cultural products are perceived and valued within a given context. In this sense, specific social and historical periods may amplify certain themes, aesthetics, or narratives, as these resonate more strongly with the prevailing cultural and political currents of the time (Moulin 1986). Broader societal trends, including shifts in political discourse or aesthetic movements, can also impact the appeal of particular genres or authors, showing that literary tastemaking is both relational and situated within larger socio-historical processes. In this way, tastemaking emerges as a complex phenomenon, influenced by institutional power, individual agency, cross-cultural interactions, and socio-historical contexts (Janssen et al. 2011; Meyer 2000).

With this broader argument in mind, this chapter seeks to describe the lifecycle of the Persian translation of the well-known Dutch-language novel *De engelenmaker* in Iran's book market, from selection and production to reception and tastemaking. The methodology for this research involved a multi-faceted approach to gather comprehensive data on the presence and impact of Dutch literature in the Persian literary market. Fieldwork was conducted in Iran, utilising the extensive resources of Iran's National Library database (National Library and Archives of Iran n.d.) and Persian Book House to access consistent and up-to-date records on Dutch literary works and their translations. This provided a foundational dataset of titles and their publication histories.

To gain further insight, individual websites and literary reviews were analysed, offering perspectives into the reception and critique of Dutch-language novels within Persian literary circles. These online resources helped contextualise the market trends and reader responses. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including the publisher and the translator of *De engelenmaker* in Persian. These interviews provided qualitative insights into the decision-making processes, challenges, and strategies involved in bringing Dutch literature

to an Iranian audience. This mixed-methods approach ensured a holistic understanding of the literary, cultural, and commercial dynamics at play.

### **Translation from Dutch as an emerging phenomenon in the Persian literary market**

In this section, we shed light on the contemporary social dynamics of Persian literary publishing, and then we delve into the emerging phenomenon of Dutch-language novels in Persian translation within the Persian literary market. For the sake of analysis, we divide the factors into three broad categories: political, economic, and cultural. However, when examining the logic of literary publishing, it becomes clear that the factors involved cannot be reduced to these categories alone. Instead, literary publishing is an embedded, emergent, multi-dimensional phenomenon in which all these factors are simultaneously at work. From a political and economic perspective, Iran's semi-autonomous literary publishing scene presents a unique case. Contrary to what Sapiro posits in "How Do Literary Works Cross Borders (or Not)?" (2016), translated literature in Iran faces less severe control compared to publications in the national language, to the extent that some publishing houses use translated literature as a resilient strategy to overcome structural constraints on national literature (Ashrafi 2024). However, the severity of control has varied across different politically dominant cultural contexts (see Ashrafi 2019).

While literary publishing in Iran is far from being fully autonomous, it is not as highly politicised as in fascist or communist countries. Many independent publishers strive to maintain their distance from dominant political and ideological influences, focusing more on cultural issues. Cultural and economic motivations are embedded in the market for translated literature in Iran. One defining factor is copyright. Iran is not a member of the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, allowing publishers to forego purchasing book rights. Consequently, it is not uncommon for multiple translations of a newly prized novel to be published simultaneously by different publishers and translators. Regardless of the legal and moral implications, this practice contributes to the diversification of the literary market.

These factors help explain why the share of translated literature is so significant in Iran's literary publishing field. However, the emergence of a peripheral literary trend is not driven by commercial profitability, but by what Sapiro calls "the pedagogic function of translation" (2016, 90). This belief holds that literature can enlighten readers about the culture and mores of a country. This belief is evident in the case of Samgis Zandi and the novels she introduced. The publishers who collaborated with her aimed to develop a novel narrative distinct from the dominant hegemonic

frames of English and French literature and create a new taste for the Iranian audience.

Characterised by these ideological/political dynamics, the state's stance toward culture, and the ever-present tension between literature and politics, the Iranian book market can be understood as a site of symbolic value-making and intellectual positioning that both shapes and responds to dynamics of social change in Iran. As Ashrafi argues,

Literary book publishing has been among the controversial issues in Iran, from pre-revolution to post-revolution. The main underlying factors that influence the attitude toward literary publishing are the political instrumentalization of literature [and] the Iranian state power's doubt about cultural goods including art and literature, i.e. the intellectual function of literature and novels.

(2019, 231–232)

This intellectual function of novels, and translated novels in particular, goes back to the nineteenth century in Iran, when “early translations from European languages introduced ‘new ideas’ into the Iranian culture whose ‘modernization’ would not have been possible without translation” (Azadibougar 2010, 301). It is in this period that the novel was imported into Iran’s already rich poetic tradition “at a historical moment when socio-cultural transformations had created needs which classical literature could not gratify and, as a result, translation became the means of response” (Azadibougar 2014, 93). Similarly, Balay (2006, 11) emphasised that the reason behind the indisputable importance of translation on Iranians is that “the translated Western works influenced all classes of society.”<sup>1</sup> Since its arrival, translated fiction has held a privileged position in Iran’s literary market, leading to a “continued dependency,” particularly when it comes to novels (Ashrafi 2019, 225), as can be seen in Figure 4.1.

A long-term look at the source languages of translated novels in the contemporary Persian literary market shows the dominant position of English and French: more than half of translated novels in Persian had English or French as their source language, as can be seen in Figure 4.2.

As Figure 4.2 suggests, the share of English and French works has grown over the years. Interestingly, this was more equally distributed between 1997 and 2005, a period characterised by fewer structural constraints on cultural production, leading to a decrease in governmental supervision of book publishing and the establishment of a new wave of government support for publishers. This fertile environment for writing and publishing led to an increase in the number of literary works and source languages represented in Persian translation. Similarly, the number of published women authors and translators increased steadily throughout the late 1990s and 2000s (Ashrafi 2024).

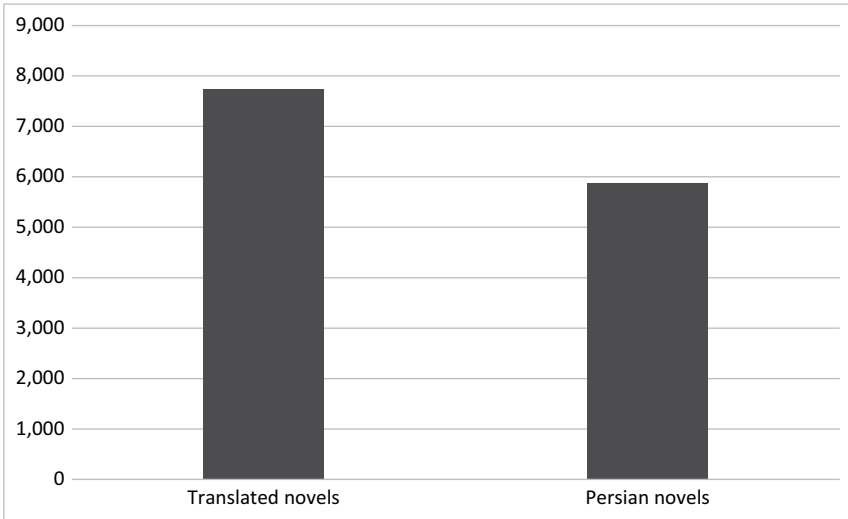


Figure 4.1 Number of translated and Persian novels in Iran's literary market, 1991–2010 (see Ashrafi 2017).

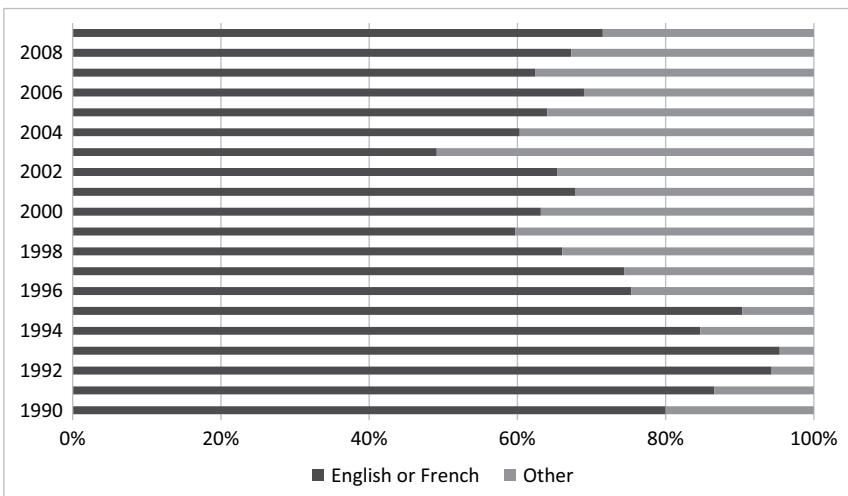


Figure 4.2 Share of English and French translations compared to all other source languages in Iran's market for translated novels, 1991–2010 (Ashrafi 2017).

A closer look at Dutch–Persian literary transfer shows that the earliest translation flows start in 1996, with translated children’s and young adult literature published by the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, an Iranian government organisation. Works of poetry, published with the financial support of the Dutch Foundation for Literature (Nederlands Letterenfonds), would follow. *Oorlogswinter* (Winter in wartime; 1972) by Jan Terlouw was the first Dutch novel to enter the Persian language area in the period under study, published in 2005 by Soroush, the publishing arm of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) organisation. Dutch–Persian translation flows remain limited, however. According to the bibliographic data we collected from the National Library and Archives of Iran database (n.d.), in the period 2005–2023 a total of 59 Dutch-language works of literature were translated into Persian, distributed across the genres of children and young adult literature (28; 48% of the total), novel (16; 27%), poetry (12; 20%), and plays (3; 5%). Although accounting for a smaller percentage overall, novels increasingly found their way to the lists of prestigious Iranian publishing houses, which was not necessarily the case for Dutch children’s literature and poetry books. One novel, *De avond is ongemak* (The discomfort of evening) by Lucas Rijneveld, which won the International Booker Prize in 2020, was translated (indirectly via English)<sup>2</sup> by four different translators and published by four different publishers in that same year, a strong indication that some Iranian publishers base their selection practices on this prize, even when multiple publishers select the same source text for translation.

### *Samgis Zandi*

Only a small handful of translators connect the Dutch and Persian literary fields (often via English), with Samgis Zandi as the most prolific Dutch–Persian translator. Samgis Zandi, born in 1960 in Zanjan, Iran, holds a bachelor’s degree in biology from Iran and migrated to the Netherlands nearly twenty years ago. While in Iran, she wrote children’s books and received awards for her plays. Before moving to the Netherlands, she spent several years in Denmark, where she translated the Danish novel *Froken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (Smilla’s sense of snow) into Persian. Her passion for literature and translating lesser-known works into Persian is one of her most notable attributes. She is a Flanders Literature–accredited translator of Dutch–Persian fiction.<sup>3</sup> Zandi has been based in Amsterdam for over twenty years and translated eight novels from Dutch into Persian between 2012 and 2021, shown in [Table 4.1](#).

In the following section, we examine Zandi’s most recent translation, *De engelenmaker*, tracing its journey to Iran and analysing the production

Table 4.1 Overview of Dutch-language novels translated by Samgis Zandi.

<i>Dutch Title</i>	<i>English Title Translation</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Publication Year</i>	<i>Publisher</i>
<i>Rituelen</i>	Rituals	Cees Nooteboom	2012	Farhang Nashr No
<i>Oorlogswinter</i>	Winter in wartime	Jan Terlouw	2014	Farhang Nashr No
<i>Het verdriet van België</i>	The sorrow of Belgium	Hugo Claus	2014	Amout
<i>Nooit meer slapen</i>	Beyond sleep	Willem Frederik Hermans	2017	Cheshmeh
<i>De aanslag</i>	The assault	Harry Mulisch	2018	Cheshmeh
<i>Philipe en de anderen</i>	Philip and the others	Cees Nooteboom	2020	Farhang Nashr No
<i>Heren van de thee</i>	Tea lords	Hella S. Haasse	2020	Morvarid
<i>De engelenmaker</i>	The angel maker	Stefan Brijs	2021	Amout

process of the Persian translation through a sociological lens. We then discuss her role as a translator in forming and reinforcing a new taste of literature in Iran’s literary market.

### From selection to reception: The Persian journey of *De engelenmaker*

*De engelenmaker* is a Gothic horror novel set in the 1980s. It follows the story of Victor Hoppe, a savant who chooses not to communicate with others and develops a belief that God is evil. Victor becomes a respected scientific researcher but harbours a competitive attitude towards God. The book starts when Victor returns to his birth village with his infant identical triplet sons, refusing to discuss their mother. The children are isolated and kept away from other villagers, sparking curiosity. The novel delves into themes of religion, medical ethics, and the experience of being different. The author skilfully incorporates intertextual elements of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), exploring the parallel between Dr Victor Hoppe’s quest to become God and Victor Frankenstein’s creation of life. Victor’s adversarial relationship with God stems from childhood abandonment and church abuse, leading him to attempt to create life through cloning. The story gradually builds up a sense of eeriness and horror, staying grounded despite its Gothic elements. The novel is Stefan Brijs’s best-known work. It is not an easy book to read, partly due to the instability and fluidity of the characters, particularly the protagonist, and partly due to its exploration of complex ontological and philosophical questions. The book was

translated into Persian in 2021 and was widely discussed by critics and reviewers.

Here, we draw on Bourdieu's (1999b) conceptualisation of the international circulation of ideas to discuss the social conditions behind the selection, production, and reception of *De engelenmaker* in Persian. We then discuss the agency of the translator in the reception of the translation.

### *Selection*

*De engelenmaker* was the second Dutch literary work to be translated by Zandi and published by Amout Publishing House. According to the interviews conducted with the publisher and the translator, the publisher's interest in Dutch literature was initiated through a recommendation from the translator, with whom the publisher was personally acquainted. He had confidence in her taste of literature and in her translation abilities. The selection of this work for translation was based on the translator's personal affinity for its subject matter and style. The translator reported being fond of Dutch literature for its realistic nature and is generally interested in existential novels that promote thinking, engage in human pain, and manifest the courage of the author. From this perspective, the translator and the publisher share similar interests, so the initial selection made by the translator was accepted by the publisher. They both knew from the beginning that the book would not immediately appear in the bestseller list and likely would not bring about considerable financial benefits. The target readership was considered to be intellectuals and elites interested in upmarket literature.

The director of Amout Publishing House, Yusef Alikhani, has accumulated symbolic capital in Iran's literary field through his academic background in literature and his many years of active presence in the field as an author, translator, and researcher. In Iran, the position of a publishing house is mainly determined by the symbolic capital of its publisher, their networks of association with other publishers, and their power and influence on the distribution of cultural products. Using Bourdieu's terminology, the production and circulation of *De engelenmaker*, orchestrated by Amout, can be regarded as small-scale circulation where sales are not the main measure of success and where aesthetic or intellectual criteria judged by peers (authors and literary critics) are more important than the public's opinion. Bourdieu (1971) argues that the small-scale production and circulation of cultural products still has an economic rationality; recognition by peers can lead to greater success for the text and its author in the long run. When a text is accepted as a classic, it can become profitable for its publisher, although this transition from symbolic capital to economic

capital takes time compared to the short-term profit sought after in the book industry (Bourdieu 1971).

### *Labelling and classification*

The final stage of the translation production involves labelling the product. According to Bourdieu (1999b), all labels attached to a cultural product are meaningful; they produce meaning, introduce change and transformation, or even alter the sense of the original message. The paratextual material accompanying a work and the cover are significant labels, which we discuss in this section.

The preface, written by the publisher, serves as a concise introduction, presenting a historical background of the author and the source text. It provides pertinent details regarding the author's literary oeuvre, as well as his educational and professional background. Furthermore, the preface offers an overview of the novel, delineating its genre, thematic essence, as well as its literary accolades. Notably, the preface highlights the global impact of the work, elucidating its translation into fourteen languages worldwide, alongside the ongoing production of a cinematic adaptation. Finally, it underscores the significance of securing the necessary permissions from both the author and the publisher for the Persian translation of the novel.

Since Iran has not yet signed the Universal Copyright Convention (1952) or the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (1886), Iranian publishers can publish foreign works without obtaining permission from the original publishers, and they are not legally obliged to provide remuneration for copyright rights. However, certain publishers choose to request permission from the original publishers, either as a gesture of courtesy or to secure potential rights in the event of Iran's future accession to one of the international copyright conventions (Haddadian-Moghaddam 2014).

In the case of the Persian translation of *De engelenmaker*, the translator sought permission from both the author and the original publisher as a matter of courtesy, although the publisher considered this step unnecessary. From the publisher's standpoint, addressing copyright issues in Iran is a matter that requires attention at the national and international levels, rather than being solely the responsibility of private publishers.

The translator incorporated footnotes throughout the text, predominantly consisting of Dutch proper nouns that exist in their original form. Additionally, a multitude of footnotes are employed to prevent potential misunderstandings, particularly related to cultural elements associated with Flemish culture and Christianity. These footnotes aim to provide contextual clarification and enhance the reader's comprehension of the translated work. For instance, the expression *tournée générale* is transliterated

in the Persian alphabet within the text and is accompanied by a corresponding explanatory footnote. The footnote elucidates the meaning and cultural context of the expression, clarifying its usage as a French expression common in Dutch-speaking Belgium expressing a situation where a patron buys a round of drinks for everyone in a café.

The back cover uses a standardised format the publisher employs for all its translated books. It systematically introduces the work, author, and translator, thereby establishing a consistent framework. Commencing with a concise synopsis of the narrative, the initial lines on the back cover offer a brief overview of the story:

Dr Victor Hoppe returns to his hometown, Wolfheim, after twenty years. The villagers are suspicious of his sudden return, especially when they discover he has brought with her three infant-children who are only a few weeks old. The children are rarely seen in public, which further arouses curiosity, and when it turns out that the three children are suffering from a serious illness, the rumours reach their peak. Then it turns out that not only the children but the doctor himself is also in trouble. He struggles with bitter memories of his childhood and eventually makes a decision that should bring him immortality. (Brijs 2021)<sup>4</sup>

The text is complemented by a photograph of the original Dutch front cover. Following this concise introduction, the back cover features fragments from three newspaper reviews in Persian translation. The first, sourced from *The Independent*, characterises the novel as “a tall tale of angelic sons and lofty ideals,”<sup>5</sup> underscoring its fantastical elements. The second appraisal, originating from the Dutch daily morning newspaper, *De Volkskrant*, lauds the novel as “a masterfully crafted story,”<sup>6</sup> emphasising its literary merits. Lastly, a review from *Vrij Nederland* commends the book as “a magical novel that once again proves what an extraordinary storyteller Brijs is,”<sup>7</sup> further extolling the author’s storytelling prowess. These reviews collectively endorse and affirm the novel’s literary excellence and enchanting nature. The inclusion of blurbs from Dutch and Anglophone news outlets on the back cover signals a strategic positioning of the book in the Iranian market. By highlighting the strong points of the novel and its author through endorsements from reputable international sources, the publisher aims to enhance the book’s credibility and appeal to Iranian readers. This marketing strategy suggests an effort to position the translated novel as a high-quality literary work that has garnered recognition and praise beyond Iran’s borders. Additionally, featuring endorsements from foreign news outlets may create a sense of curiosity and intrigue among Iranian readers, potentially increasing the novel’s visibility

and attracting a wider audience within the Iranian literary market. The back cover also reproduces text found in the preface, providing details about the author and the novel. It begins by introducing Stephan Brijs, highlighting his notable literary contributions and accomplishments. The novel is once again presented, elucidating its genre, thematic essence, accolades, and global reception in translation. There is also a photograph of the author, providing readers with a tangible connection to the literary figure. The final component is a succinct introduction of the translator, Samgis Zandi, complemented with a photograph of her.

As illustrated in [Figure 4.3](#), the front cover design of the Persian edition diverges significantly from the original edition; however, it closely follows the visual layout of the English translation, translated by Hester Velmans and published by Penguin Books in 2008, with the English text replaced by Persian. According to the interviews conducted with the publisher, the decision to adopt the cover of the English translation for the Persian edition was a collaborative and subjective decision made jointly by the publisher and the designer. The publisher reasoned that the Iranian readership could



Figure 4.3 Front covers of the original work and its Persian translation.

establish a strong visual connection with the cover of the English edition, thus opting to adopt it for the Persian edition.

The publisher classifies the Persian translation of *De engelenmaker* as “serious literature,”<sup>8</sup> which is intended to attract a particular audience consisting of intellectuals and elites rather than the general public. To signal the book’s literary prestige and distinguish it from more commercial titles, the publisher opted to release the book exclusively in hardcover format. This aligns with the publisher’s broader practice of presenting the books he considers to be exceptional literary works in hardcover only.

### *The Iranian reception*

This section examines the reception of the Persian translation of *De engelenmaker* in Iran, drawing on the multi-faceted model of reception of cultural products proposed by Griswold (1987). Griswold introduces five interrelated types of reception of cultural objects: first, interpretation, which refers to the meaning constructed in audiences’ minds; second, market success or popularity; third, endurance or persistence of a cultural object over time; fourth, canonisation, which is marked by elite groups acknowledging the value of the cultural object; fifth, the impact of the cultural object on related fields (Griswold, 1987). Approaching reception from these perspectives helps provide a more vivid picture of how the Persian translation of *De engelenmaker* was received in the Iranian market and culture.

To further nuance this reception analysis, it is important to consider how cultural and linguistic distance can shape interpretation, especially in translated literature. According to Bourdieu (1999b), the sense and function of a foreign work may be subject to different interpretations and even misunderstandings on the part of readers in the receiving culture. Bourdieu points to the fact that texts circulate without the contexts in which they were produced and that recipients “re-interpret the texts in accordance with the structure of the field of reception[, which may] generate some formidable misunderstandings” (1999b, 225). Differences between the original and receiving cultural fields are sometimes so great that they “can actually create fictitious oppositions between similar things, and false parallels between things that are fundamentally different” (Bourdieu 1999b, 225), which can distort the analysis of a translation’s reception.

Being a native Iranian who has lived in the Netherlands for an extended period and is also familiar with Flanders, Zandi is fully acquainted with the languages and cultures of both the source and target fields. Recognising the inherent risks of misinterpretation arising from disparities between Flemish, Christian culture, and Iranian Muslim culture, the translator employed various translation techniques to ensure that significant

misunderstandings were averted while preserving the authentic Flemish cultural ambiance. Notably, she incorporated footnotes whenever encountering cultural elements specific to Flanders that she deemed potentially susceptible to misunderstanding. Footnotes, as opposed to endnotes, were preferred by Zandi due to their immediate accessibility and capacity to mitigate misinterpretations. By utilising footnotes strategically, the translator aimed to provide readers with additional contextual information, aiding in their comprehension and preventing unintended misconceptions.

Regarding the market success and endurance of the work over time, it is noteworthy that the book was first published in the spring of 2021 with an initial print run of 1,100 copies. Subsequently, in the autumn of the same year, an additional 550 copies were printed. While this figure does not constitute a bestseller in the Iranian book market, it exceeded the initial expectations of the publisher. It is pertinent to underscore the publisher's assertion that the Persian translation of *De engelenmaker* achieved more market success than the Persian translation of Claus's *Het verdriet van België*, a work that was translated by the same translator and published by the same publishing house, albeit seven years earlier. The publisher posited that this discrepancy in market success was partially attributable to the translation of *Het verdriet van België* serving as a worthy and reliable precursor, thereby paving the way for the subsequent translation from Dutch.

As indicated, the translator and publisher targeted a readership of intellectuals and elites. The reception of the work among writers and literary critics was positive, leading to the publication of several online reviews. Notably, Mehdi Yazdani-Khorram, a renowned Iranian author, journalist, and literary critic, expressed his astonishment towards the translation of *De engelenmaker*, characterising it as a work that “caught him off guard”<sup>9</sup> (Amout Publishing House, n.d.). In his review, he praised the book for its captivating and robust narrative and its introduction of prominent themes and motifs and unreservedly recommended it for reading. Furthermore, he commended the translator for her discerning selection and proficient translation skills. Notably, he acknowledged the translator's willingness to undertake the risk of introducing an author who was relatively unknown in Iran. Additionally, several other literary critics provided their insights through various reviews, primarily focusing on the original author's abilities and the strengths of the narrative.

The impact of the Persian translation of *De engelenmaker* on the literary field is expected to manifest over an extended period. Initially, the translator's endeavours in presenting the literature of a peripheral language primarily attracted the attention of intellectuals and bibliophiles, gradually extending their reach to a broader audience. In this process, the translator assumes a vital role in enlightening and familiarising the public with people from unfamiliar backgrounds, cultures, and value systems.

As a result, Samgis Zandi aimed to enhance the audience's general knowledge of Dutch cultural elements by adopting strategies that balance fidelity to the source text with cultural accessibility for Iranian readers. In this sense, she broadens the audience's cultural horizons, contributing to the shaping of literary taste.

### The translator as tastemaker

This section examines translators' influence on literary tastes within the receiving culture. Building on our previous discussion of *De engelenmaker's* entry into the Persian literary market, first we explore the role of contextual factors in hindering or facilitating cultural tastemaking and literary diversification. Then we will focus on the role of Samgis Zandi in shaping and driving the collective taste for Dutch fiction in Iran's literary market.

Broadly, literary translation as a negotiation site between cultures embodies a delicate balance of the exotic and the familiar, appealing to foreign audiences' cultural logic and revealing the role of cultural intermediaries in shaping and curating narratives that align with target cultures' tastes (van Doorslaer 2012). This process, as theorised by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), involves tastemaking that is structured not only by hierarchical fields but also by the cross-cultural negotiations that occur within and across literary systems. Through these cross-cultural exchanges, Dutch literature's transnational image emerges as a co-creation between Dutch and foreign literary systems, transforming perceptions of Dutch culture in ways that are both contingent on and responsive to foreign tastes (McMartin and Gentile 2020). Rather than simply transmitting Dutch culture, translators, editors, and literary critics dynamically adapt it, engaging in meaning-making interactions that integrate the relational fields and histories of both the source and target cultures (Mische 2003). Mische's (2003) concept of meaning-making further elucidates this negotiation, showing how identity and cultural expression emerge from temporal and relational interactions within social fields. In this context, Dutch literature's appeal is not inherent but shaped by transnational processes, where cultural agents—translators, critics, and publishers—mediate representations that resonate with foreign audiences. In Iran's literary market, the introduction of Dutch literary traditions has been initiated and supported by the Dutch Foundation for Literature. This effort has featured works such as poetry by Arjen Duinker and Hester Knibbe, as well as a recent anthology highlighting Dutch women poets.

On the other hand, the dynamics of tastemaking within the transnational literary field are also closely intertwined with intellectual discourses and institutional frameworks, which legitimise particular tastes and elevate specific works. Bourdieu's framework posits that cultural tastemaking operates

within a structured hierarchy of social relations, where literary works are imbued with value based on their contextual production and reception (Schwartz 1997). Institutional mechanisms—such as literary awards and academic reviews—reinforce these hierarchies, with critics and scholars framing narratives that contribute to the cultural status of Dutch literature abroad. Through these mechanisms, literature circulates ideas that reflect and reinforce societal values and hierarchies, solidifying its place within global discourses on national and cultural identity (Eagleton 2011).

The appearance of Dutch-language novels in the Iranian book market during the late 1990s and early 2000s coincided with a period of relative cultural relaxation in Iran, largely due to the open political and ideological stance of the Reformists—a political faction advocating for greater social freedoms, civil society, and cultural openness within the framework of the Islamic Republic (Ashrafi 2019). This era ushered in a series of cultural phenomena, including the establishment of prestigious independent literary awards such as the Mehregan Prize,<sup>10</sup> the Golshiri Literary Award (2001),<sup>11</sup> and the Yalda Literary Award (2000);<sup>12</sup> the rise of modern bookstores with cafés; and the emergence of women’s NGOs that were closely aligned with literary circles (Ashrafi 2024). These developments reflect a growing openness to cultural pluralism within Iran’s literary landscape, which particularly resonated with younger generations, who were drawn to these shifts more than their parents, signalling a transformation in Iran’s cultural and literary dynamics.

This new market demand, especially for translated novels, and the absence of copyright restrictions allowed a young generation of literary publishers, particularly publishers of fiction, to enter the Iranian book market. Publishers such as Nashr No, Amout, and Faraz exemplify this movement, focusing on translated fiction, primarily from peripheral languages or lesser-known authors.

In the formation of the Persian translation of *De engelemaker*, we witness a collaborative effort involving diverse institutional and individual agents engaged in the selection, production, presentation, and reception of the work. This collaborative process mirrors Bourdieu’s concept of the field, where works of art gain value through a network of institutions and intermediaries, each with distinct roles in shaping public perception. Undoubtedly central to this phenomenon is Samgis Zandi, whose role extends far beyond translation. Her linguistic precision and cultural sensitivity not only enhance the accessibility of Dutch narratives but also influence publishers to prioritise literary quality over immediate profit by advocating for highbrow literature. Additionally, the novel’s dense references—religious, historical, and scientific—pose challenges to Iranian readers unfamiliar with the cultural contexts of the original. These references, as Bourdieu would suggest, may seem esoteric unless mediated through explanatory

strategies, thereby enabling readers to develop the requisite cultural competence to appreciate the text fully. As such, Zandi has become a pivotal figure in introducing and establishing Dutch literature as a significant presence in Iran's cultural landscape, thereby reshaping the literary tastes and preferences of Iranian readers. Furthermore, critics, whose endorsements can legitimise the work within certain literary hierarchies, also welcome her works as sophisticated and culturally relevant.

The positive reception of Zandi's translation of the *De engelenmaker* can be seen in the larger frame of her oeuvre. A commonality across her selection of works is that these works are not necessarily bestsellers. She is more interested in creating a willingness in the intellectual class to read Dutch-language novels, which seems to have succeeded in this last work. She provides her readership with detailed footnotes to create a so-called cultural awareness of Dutch culture for an Iranian readership. This mediation inevitably carries the taste of the mediator; it is not a neutral conduit, but it is the work of taste production, inflected by Zandi's own taste. This authoritative function (agency) of the translator as a cultural intermediary depends on several interrelated factors, foremost among them the personal aspect, which Bourdieu termed *habitus*. Her background in biology, she emphasised, greatly assisted in translating *De engelenmaker*, as it contains scientific concepts on genetics and embryology.

After her twenty years of studying, living, and working in the Netherlands, along with her literary background in Iran, Zandi's translations are highly praised by critics and reviewers for their accuracy, fluency, and transparency. Furthermore, a noteworthy attribute of her professional character is that she can manage Iran's strict censorship system very well. She accepts the need to revise sensitive issues and make them less sensitive:

Nearly a complete chapter of the novel *Rituals* was removed by auditors of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) so that not much of the subject [of that chapter, dealing with the religious ceremony of circumcision] remained, but I did not resist the changes because it was more important for me to publish the work. There were lesbian characters in *The Angel Maker*, and I was confident that I would have to remove this issue. However, to my surprise, I saw that the novel was approved for publication without revisions. (personal communication with author)

Despite the Persian translation of *Rituals* facing severe auditing by MCIG, Zandi still believes that auditors are less strict when it comes to translation from peripheral languages. Obviously, her calm character in dealing with MCIG's ideological and religious considerations places her within a realm of safety. So, her *habitus* formed in such a way that

internalised these structural limitations. For Zandi, self-censorship usually happened prior to structural censorship:

I typically begin by researching the author and the work and reviewing readers' comments in the original language. I read multiple summaries and reviews about the novel. If time permits, I read or listen to the book. If I find the book of high quality, relatively free of censorable content, and personally intriguing, I decide to translate it.<sup>13</sup>

This view of agency leads us to the next crucial factor in field dynamics: the *nexus of associations and relations*. When looking into the list of publishers with whom Zandi has collaborated, it becomes apparent that they are well-established literary publishers; she relies on the publisher's accumulated symbolic and cultural capital to give weight to her own works. In other words, she is well-positioned in a nexus of the right relations. For a translator based in the Netherlands (rather than in the Iranian publishing centre of Tehran), it can be difficult to convince a prominent publisher to publish a novel from a lesser-known literature. A noteworthy common feature among all these publishers is that all have their own bookshop for distributing their works. In Iran's literary field, book distribution is challenging, especially for small and medium-sized publishing houses.

Notably, it is uncommon for publishing houses to work with lesser-known translators, especially for translating from peripheral languages. In Zandi's recent collaboration with Amout Publishing House, the publisher cited several reasons for this choice. First, due to the lack of copyright enforcement in Iran's literary market, working with a lesser-known translator poses less risks for the publisher. Second, the MCIG, responsible for issuing publishing permissions, imposes less scrutiny on works by lesser-known translators, generally making the approval process smoother (although this was not the case for Zandi's translation of *Rituals*, as discussed above). This lack of sensitivity goes back to political and socio-cultural issues, such as the translator herself and the source culture. Samgis Zandi is among the least controversial translators. As mentioned, fiction is among the most challenging and turbulent areas of Iran's literary field. Hence, it goes without saying that the translators' stance toward political and socio-cultural issues is one of the most determining factors. Third, the quest for novelty is another crucial element in the publisher's desire to invest in different and slightly new literature. Zandi published two of her early works with an influential publisher like Cheshmeh in a special fiction series, *Jahan-e-No* (New World), aiming to introduce lesser-known literary works to the Iranian audience. Later, she published her other works with smaller publishers like Amout and Nashr No. Since she had already established her reputation with influential publishers, Amout and Nashr No

approached her. Regarding *De engelenmaker*, Zandi expressed satisfaction with her publisher, noting that they promoted the novel effectively, leading to positive reviews from well-known critics. However, she added, “for my next novel, I am going to publish with Cheshmeh, because it has a larger audience.”<sup>14</sup> Seemingly, after gaining symbolic capital among the literary elite, she aims to reach a broader Iranian audience through Cheshmeh. This publisher has a dual role: initially introducing her to the Iranian literary elite, helping her foster an appreciation for Dutch fiction, and now assisting her in expanding this tastemaking to a wider audience.

Like agency, taste seems to be deeply personalised—rooted in an individual’s history and embodied dispositions. Still, it is also an emergent phenomenon, more precisely a relational one, which comes from a complex process of personal experiences and social circumstances. What we perceive as taste, therefore, is continuously shaped by this interplay—our personal inclinations responding to shifting social contexts, institutional frameworks, and interactions with other members of the field. Bourdieu’s sociological model bridges subjectivity and structure: the so-called system of dispositions is both shaped by and shapes the field. Recent scholarship situates tastemaking even more relationally. Will Atkinson’s (2016) empirical analysis highlights how literary taste is structured by intersecting axes like class and gender, revealing that taste preferences emerge not just from individual habitus, but also from broader social identities and embedded power dynamics.

Hence, the initial personalisation of taste (via habitus) is inseparable from its evolution in social fields. It emerges relationally as we navigate cultural norms, institutional expectations, and collective patterns of practice. Taste, then, is *constitutively social*: though it feels intimate and subjective, it is continually produced in interaction—not an internal faculty, but an outcome of dynamic processes linking personal biography with relational structures of the field. As Geary argues, “aspects of taste can be unconscious and affected by extraneous details and decisions” (2020, 289). The important point is that in the cultural field, cultural intermediaries often take up important decision-making roles, and “there is a circularity to the production of taste: the tastes of the decision-maker produce the arts ecology, which in turn plays a role in determining (future) tastes” (Geary 2020, 289). In our case of Dutch–Persian literary transfer, this pivotal intermediary role was performed by translator Samgis Zandi.

### Concluding remarks

Recalling Bourdieu, within the field of cultural production, the real power in the literary field is held by agents of consecration and cultural intermediaries (Smith Maguire and Mathews 2012; Driscoll 2014). These intermediaries bridge the gap between the production and consumption of

cultural goods; they authorise and reinforce cultural tastes by legitimising certain works and excluding others from the canon. By extension, cultural intermediaries generate symbolic capital, constructing value systems and shaping aesthetic preferences within the literary field. They engage in what Bourdieu terms the “gentle manipulation” of tastes (Bourdieu 1984, 365), influencing the consumption of particular goods and practices while simultaneously defining and defending the cultural boundaries of (new class) group positions in society.

In this chapter, we examined the lifecycle of the Dutch-language novel *De engelemaker* in its Persian translation, emphasising the translator’s crucial role as a cultural intermediary. Beyond mere linguistic transfer, the translator acts as a mediator who facilitates the novel’s entry into the Iranian literary field, thus contributing to the formation of a Dutch literary tradition in Iran. However, as we argued, the translator’s efforts are bolstered by a network of reinforcing agents, including publishers, literary critics, and the broader socio-cultural context of the recipient culture. These actors and structures collectively illustrate that taste formation is an emergent phenomenon, shaped by the dynamic interplay of field-specific logics, institutional frameworks, and the habitus of the agents involved.

## Notes

- 1 All quotations were translated by the authors. Original text in Persian: “ترجمه آثار: ”غربی تمام طبقات جامعه را تحت تاثیر قرار می داد”
- 2 The National Library and Archives of Iran database (n.d.) lists two additional novels translated from Dutch to Persian indirectly via English (2017): Gerard Reve’s modern classic *De avond* (1947; The evenings), and Suzanne Vermeer’s thriller *Cruise* (2009, 2014).
- 3 Translator accreditation by Flanders Literature automatically implies accreditation by the Dutch Foundation for Literature, as the two organisations share a unified list of approved translators. For foreign publishers, collaborating with an accredited translator is a mandatory requirement to qualify for a translation grant.
- 4 Original text in Persian: “دکتر ویکتور هوپه پس از بیست سال به زادگاهش، وولفهایم برمیگردد. روستاییها به ”بازگشت ناگهانی او مشکوک میشوند، بهخصوص وقتی پی میبرند او سه نوزاد با خود آورده است که فقط چند هفته از عمرشان میگذرد. بچهها به ندرت در انظار دیده میشوند که همین کنجکاوها را بیشتر تحریک میکند و زمانی که معلوم میشود سه بچه مبتلا به بیماری وخیمی هستند، شایعهها به اوج خود میرسند. بعد معلوم میشود نه تنها بچهها، خود دکتر نیز گرفتار مشکلاتی است. او ”با خاطرات تلخ کودکیاش درگیر است، و عاقبت تصمیمی میگیرد که باید برایش نامیرایی به ارمغان بیاورد”
- 5 Original text in Persian: “یک داستان بزرگ؛ درباره پسرهای آسمانی و آرزوهای بلند”
- 6 Original text in Persian: “یک داستان استادانه”
- 7 Original text in Persian: “یک رمان جادویی که یک بار دیگر نشان میدهد برای چه داستاننویس خارقالعادهای ”است”
- 8 Original text in Persian: “ادبیات فاخر”
- 9 Original text in Persian: “خیلی شگفتزده کرد”
- 10 The Mehregan Prize began in 1999 to honour the best Persian novel. Originally run by PEKA, a publisher cooperative, it continued independently after PEKA closed in 2006, supported by private sponsors.

- 11 The Houshang Golshiri Literary Award was an independent Iranian literary prize established in 2001 by the Golshiri Foundation after Houshang Golshiri's death. Awarded annually to outstanding Persian fiction, it was one of Iran's most prestigious independent prizes until it ended in 2014. Golshiri's works were banned for much of the Islamic Republic era.
- 12 The Yalda Literary Award was a private prize started in 2002 by Caravan Publishing and the Andisheh Sazan Institute. It ran for four rounds before ending after Andisheh Sazan's closure, with Caravan Publishing organizing the last round alone.
- 13 Interview with Samgis Zandi on November 8, 2021. Original text in Persian: "من معمولا با تحقیق درباره نویسنده، خود اثر و همینطور نقدهای نوشته شده درباره آن در زبان اصلی کارم را شروع می‌کنم. اگر زمان داشته باشم کتاب را میخوانم یا گوش می‌دهم. چنانچه اثر کیفیت بالایی داشته باشد و محتوا قابل سانسور نداشته باشد تصمیمم "به ترجمه آن میگیرم"
- 14 Interview with Samgis Zandi on September, 5, 2022. Original text in Persian: "برای رمان بعدی ام تصمیم گرفتم با چشمه کار کنم که ناشری شناخته شده است و مخاطبان زیادی دارد"

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## 5 From Manuscript to Memory

### Publishing and Translational Pathways of Anne Frank's Diary in Italy

*Paola Gentile and Dolores Ross*<sup>1</sup>

Anne Frank and her diary have been, and continue to be, fascinating objects of study in many countries, including Italy. The diary is the most translated Dutch work in the world (Vervae 2017)<sup>2</sup>, but it is much more than that. The story of a teenager describing her life in hiding from Nazi persecution in Amsterdam has come to be a universal icon of Holocaust literature and has given rise to numerous academic publications, journalistic articles, exhibitions, transmedia adaptations and educational initiatives—but also to ideological disputes and political pamphlets. Introducing the diary into a new country presents, and especially presented in the past, numerous obstacles that require appropriate strategies for publishing a translation that is both acceptable and engaging to the intended audience. Overcoming these hurdles has been necessary due to the diary's political significance, its complicated origins and editorial history in its home country, the sometimes daring nature of its early translations in the unsettling post-war era, and the variety of images attributed to the author, which have changed depending on how the diary was interpreted and received by the new target culture.

The principal aim of this chapter is to contribute to research on the translations of the diary by delving into the history of Anne Frank's footprints in Italy and describing the trajectory of the Italian *Diario*. The most scrutinised translations of the diary are the inaugural versions published in three major language areas: French, German and English (Barnouw 2022; Cluff 2020; *Der Spiegel* 1959; Noble 2013a, 2013b; Schroth 2006, 2014; van der Stroom 1986). We have also taken into consideration translations in other languages and cultures. Missinne and Michajlova (2019) have focused on how the diary's initial release in East Germany (DDR) helped to open the Russian market. Important pieces of information on the first Spanish-language translation and subsequent translations are offered by Fernández-Gil (2019). Spies and Feinauer (2011) discussed the first translation in Afrikaans. In a recent paper, Dagnino (2023) examined the Basque translations. Larsson-Toll (2021) covered Swedish translations, while Guśc

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(2018) went through the history of the first Polish publication (issued in 1957) and its reception in post-Stalinist Poland. Engelbrecht (2018) referred to the first Czech translation, which was released in 1956, one year before the DDR edition, using the West German translation as its source text.

The present contribution is part of an ongoing research project entitled “Anne Frank’s Footprints: Sociology of Translation and Reception, Digital (Post)Memory and Memory Education in a Global Perspective,” coordinated by the Dutch department of the University of Trieste.<sup>3</sup> The first work package—led by Trieste—aims to provide a comprehensive overview of mediators and worldwide translation trajectories in Italian, English, French, German, Spanish, and Afrikaans. For the second work package, researchers in Bologna and Padua are investigating Second World War remembrance practices in the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and Japan through a peace-education lens, bringing together experts from various fields and backgrounds. In the third work package, the Rome research team is zeroing in on Anne Frank’s lesser-known publications. Colleagues in Naples are focusing on literary translations and stage adaptations of the diary, the fourth work package.

Existing evidence provides a foundation for preparing an Italian chapter of the diary’s historiography (see, for example, Barnouw 2022; Battocletti 2018; Bucciantini 2021; Ross 2024; Terrenato 2023). This contribution aims to bring together various strands addressed in these sources by using archival research and reviewing secondary literature to provide new evidence, with a particular focus on the first Italian-language edition and the specific context that influenced it. The research aims to investigate the following questions: which dynamics and sociocultural and political conditions shaped the context for the first Italian translation? Furthermore, what factors contribute to the unique nature of this translation?

In our view, examining the diary’s journey to Italy aligns well with the aims of this volume, as it provides a paradigmatic example of a case from the Low Countries, allowing to gain a better understanding of the transfer dynamics of Dutch literature. The diary was written during the Second World War and published in the Netherlands shortly afterwards. The first Italian translation was completed in 1954, mainly as a result of a local socio-political and editorial initiative. This literary translation strategy was quite different from the financial and support systems offered by state-sponsored organisations, such as the Dutch Foundation for Literature (DFL; Netherlands Letterenfonds). Two predecessors of this institution, Stichting ter Bevordering van de Vertaling van Nederlands Letterkundig Werk (Foundation for Promotion of the Translation of Dutch Literature) and Stichting Fonds voor de Letteren (Foundation for Literature), were established in 1954 and 1965, respectively, following initiatives in other small countries that set up similar organisations in the 1950s to promote their national

literatures (Vimr 2020, 51). These two foundations were a first step towards the professionalisation and institutionalisation of a foreign strategy for Dutch literature (Wolters 2019, 93), which employs literary translation as a vehicle for establishing cultural diplomacy (van Doorslaer 2023, 243).<sup>4</sup>

The initial translations of Anne Frank's diary were released before the government established financial mechanisms for the selection, translation, and promotion of Dutch literary works. However, the current case study is well aligned with the objectives of this volume, which are to explore the people, organisations, practices, and contexts that shape the makings of translated literature, zeroing in on book translations from a lesser-translated language situated on the periphery of the world literary system. What we will provide here is a behind-the-scenes view, focusing on the numerous voices driving the diary's transfer to and within Italy.

We are convinced that few literary works are so stimulating for translation studies scholars as Anne Frank's diary, especially for those engaged with the sociology of translation. Book translating is a social practice "that requires a high degree of interaction and collaboration between an array of different agents, such as authors, publishers, translators, editors, copy editors, critics, librarians, non-professional readers" (Alvstad et al. 2017b, 4). Anne Frank's diary offers a fascinating story about agents, textual and contextual voices (Alvstad et al. 2017a), multimedia translations, imagology, and (post)memory studies.

In our description of the diary's trajectory to Italy, we will examine important aspects of the way Anne Frank's name started to circulate in Italy, explaining how the sociopolitical dynamics and editorial contexts created a successful first footprint in post-war Italy. To fully appreciate the uniqueness of the diary's initial Italian edition, parallels with its first editions published in three other languages—French, German, and English—will be drawn.<sup>3</sup>

### **Theoretical framework and methodology**

This section focuses on the conceptual framework, methodology, and data employed for this study, which is mostly based on secondary literature and archival material. As stated in the previous paragraph, this case study fits within the study of literary translation policy in a unique fashion for two reasons. The first is that the mediation circuits through which the initial translations of the diary travelled have no real ties to the state or public diplomacy activities, as it was published decades before the founding of the DFL. The second reason is that, generally speaking, the DFL seeks to support mostly the translations of emerging and contemporary writers, though it also supports so-called classics (see Gentile 2022). Unlike other lesser-known works, the diary has enjoyed worldwide success since

the 1950s and has hardly ever needed financial assistance for translation. Nonetheless, the DFL translation database currently reports twenty-eight funded translations of the diary ([Nederlands Letterenfonds n.d.](#)).<sup>5</sup> Most of the translation grants went towards translations into non-European languages, including Chinese, Hindi, Afrikaans, and Georgian, as well as adaptations such as children's books or anthologies.

Even though there are many different ways to approach and analyse the literary transfer of the diary—including indirect translation, retranslation/canonisation, actor–network theory, centre–periphery dynamics, multimedia adaptations, reception studies, paratextual analysis, children's literature, corpus linguistics, museum translation, critical discourse analysis, censorship, and manipulation—we have decided to use a sociological approach concentrating solely on centre–periphery relationships ([Heilbron and Sapiro 2007, 2018](#); [Sapiro 2014, 2016, 2010](#)) and on the sociological concept of agency as pointed out by [Buzelin \(2011, 6\)](#), who defines the agent of translation as “anyone in an intermediary position (i.e., a commissioner, a reviser, or an editor) between a translator and an end user of a translation.”

This case study shares many similarities with the transnational journey of *Oorlog en terpentijn* by Stefan Hertmans (*War and Turpentine*; see [McMartin and Gentile 2020](#)), because in that case the English translation shaped translation cycles in other languages and contributed to the international success of this book. Particularly, “[t]he title's anglophone reception—including the influential review by Neel Mukherjee in *The Guardian* and the book's inclusion in *The New York Times* top ten books of 2016 list—had an important and in some cases decisive impact on publishers considering the title in other language fields” ([McMartin and Gentile 2020, 287](#)). As is often the case in the export of Dutch literature, the first translations are published in the languages of the neighbouring countries: French and German. Referring to the centre–periphery model proposed by Heilbron, “translation ratios diverge strongly across languages and are directly related to a language's dominance in the world translation system” ([2020, 140](#)), which confirms that the less a language is spoken, the fewer the chances that cultural products in that language (in this case, literary works) circulate outside the periphery.

In the case of the diary, not only was the network of agents crucial for its circulation—particularly in the first translations—but the success of the Broadway play in 1955 and the Hollywood film of 1959 also had a significant impact in Europe, where the diary had been received timidly until then ([Brouwers 2002](#); [van der Stroom 1986, 1999](#)). Research indeed suggests that before the American success, sales figures were disappointing ([Rosenfeld 1991, 248](#); [van der Stroom 1999, 68](#)). According to [Heilbron \(2020, 141\)](#), “what gets translated in peripheral languages very often depends on the selection that takes place in the centres. This is where international

symbolic capital is accrued and distributed and where the most important hierarchies of prestige are formed.” Just like in the case of *War and Turpentine*, which was boosted by a positive review in a prestigious newspaper, the enthusiastic review by journalist Meyer Levin (1952) of the diary in *The New York Times Book Review* propelled the book towards worldwide success. As we will see in the following paragraphs, it was Otto Frank’s network of contacts that made the diary a success in the United States as well.

Before examining the history of the diary in Dutch and its translations into Italian, a few elements should be explored that make this case study particularly distinctive. First, in the 1950s, English was not yet considered the hyper-central language it is now, at least not in Europe, where French and German played a far greater role, beginning with education: “In Western Europe English supplanted German and French from the 1950s onwards as the first foreign language taught in the Scandinavian countries and from the 1960s in the Netherlands” (Truchot 2002, 7). This might explain why the important transfer function of the diary’s first French translation was crucial to its international expansion. Another aspect to consider is that, in the case of the diary, the logic that a work that has symbolic capital must also have economic capital does not fully apply. The diary obtained economic capital only after having built up consistent symbolic capital, but economic success was not expected. Indeed, according to Sapiro (2016, 90), “many authors, translators, editors and even publishers undertake projects which they know will not bring them any commercial benefit. [...] Instead, they can expect symbolic profits such as recognition in the field.” This was exactly the aim of the first publication and translation efforts in the Netherlands and abroad. We do not have the exact sales figures of the diary—it is estimated that it sold about thirty million copies worldwide (Blakemore 2022)—but there is no doubt that this work has acquired both strong economic and symbolic capital over the years.

To better contextualise the theoretical framework, Figure 5.1 shows a timeline of the first wave of translations.

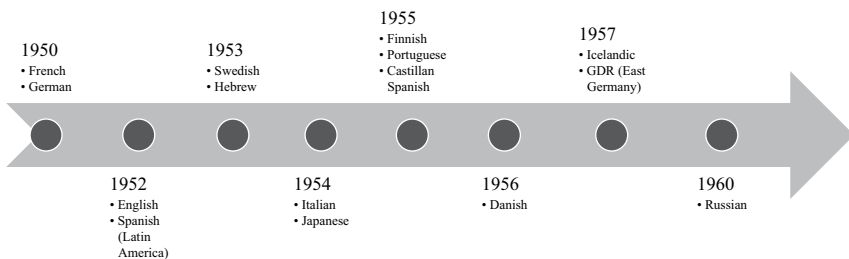


Figure 5.1 Timeline of the first wave of translations of Anne Frank’s diary.<sup>6</sup>

It should also be considered that, at a time when Europe was emerging from a disastrous war and facing an economic crisis, Otto Frank's personal contacts played a decisive role in the circulation of the diary. His exchanges with prominent figures in the cultural and business worlds, particularly within the international Jewish community, especially in Germany, were crucial. Otto Frank fulfilled a mediating and networking role that is typically played by literary agents today, and he performed tasks that went beyond mere editorial agency, particularly during the first wave of translations. Most details on his networking activities have been obtained by the authors of this chapter through archival research at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam.<sup>7</sup>

As for the main aspects hindering or facilitating literary transfer, [Sapiro \(2016, 82\)](#) illustrates four factors that may promote or hinder the circulation of literature: political, economic, cultural, and social factors. All must be considered when analysing the literary transfer of the diary. As we will see, political factors like the lack of understanding and acceptance of the atrocities of the post-war Holocaust and the denials of genocide resurfacing from the 1950s onwards ([Barnouw 1986](#)) were the catalysts for the second wave of translations. Economically speaking, the work's global popularity<sup>8</sup> has led to a considerable number of translations, retranslations, and editions, especially after the copyright expired in 2015. At the cultural level, the ongoing discussion, adaptation, and reinterpretation of the diary in light of current events signify its integration into the collective memory as a crucial testimony to one of the darkest periods in Western history. On a societal level, the diary has become an integral part of school programmes in many countries, leading continuously to new educational initiatives and museum expositions. A recent example is the Anne Frank exhibition presented by the [Anne Frank House \(2025\)](#), which ran from January to October 2025 at the Center for Jewish History in New York City and featured a full-scale recreation of Anne Frank's hiding place.

### The editorial agency of Otto Frank

It all started with Otto Frank's desire to share his daughter's diary with other people, first with friends and relatives, later with a larger public. Many studies illustrate the complex genesis of the diary in Dutch and Otto Frank's editorial interventions. Important references are [Barnouw \(2022\)](#), [van der Stroom \(1986\)](#), [Kuitert \(2007\)](#), and [Shandler \(2012\)](#), among others.

There are five different original versions to be considered, three of which were officially published. [Table 5.1](#) presents an overview of these versions.

The first edition of the diary, published by Contact in 1947 as *Het Achterhuis* (The back house), was made up of two distinct manuscripts,

Table 5.1 Overview of the original Dutch versions of Anne Frank's diary.

<i>Version A</i>	<i>Version B</i>	<i>Version C</i>	<i>Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation version</i>	<i>Version D</i>
The incomplete first version of the diary	The unfinished fiction version (Anne's revision)	The classic text (1947): <i>Het Achterhuis. Dagboekbrieven 14 juni 1942–1 augustus 1944</i> (The annex: Diary entries 14 June 1942–1 August 1944). Publisher: Contact, Amsterdam. This is a compilation made by Otto Frank of versions A and B.	The critical edition (1986): <i>De dagboeken van Anne Frank</i> (The diaries of Anne Frank), introduced by Harry Paape, Gerrold van der Stroom, and David Barnouw. Publisher: Staatsuitgeverij/ Bert Bakker, The Hague/ Amsterdam	The reader's edition (1991): <i>Het Achterhuis. Dagboekbrieven 12 juni 1942–1 augustus 1944</i> (The annex: Diary notes 12 June 1942–1 August 1944), edited by Otto Frank and Mirjam Pressler. Publisher: Bert Bakker, Amsterdam

both incomplete (for the missing parts, see [Shandler 2012](#), 29; [van der Stroom 1986](#), 66–75) and written while the author was in hiding with her family in Prinsengracht street in Amsterdam. The first version had as its initial entry June 12, 1942, Anne's thirteenth birthday, and the final entry was dated August 1, 1944, three days prior to the family's arrest by the Germans. This manuscript was later named version A. The second version, B, was edited by Anne herself. She partly transcribed her diary entries and partly rewrote them, with the aim of producing a more book-like account detailing the experiences of the eight people in hiding. Anne initiated this work in the spring of 1944, when she was almost fifteen, and worked on both versions at the same time ([Anne Frank Stichting n.d.-b](#)). The title she gave to the fictionalised version of the diary was *Het Achterhuis*.

The two manuscripts were assembled by Otto Frank, resulting in *Het Achterhuis. Dagboekbrieven 14 juni 1942–1 augustus 1944*. This version, later named version C, is the one the world came to know, as it became the diary's first official publication. Otto Frank started by translating some passages into German, intending to share them with his German family members and close acquaintances. At a very early stage, he began to pursue the idea of an official publication ([Kuitert 2007](#), 24). In the process of assembling the two manuscripts, between 1945 and 1946, he produced

several typewritten versions of the Dutch version, four of which were conserved (van der Stroom 1986, 85). He was assisted by friends with typing and language corrections, as the Frank family spoke German as their native language. Other friends helped with approaching potential publishing houses in the Netherlands and abroad (*Der Spiegel* 1959; Kuitert 2007, 23–24; van der Stroom 1986). Given the dismissive attitude of the Dutch publishing sector, Otto Frank also attempted to publish the diary in Germany. He therefore asked an old German acquaintance, Anneliese Schütz, to carry out the translation (van der Stroom 1986, 86).

The path to publication was lengthy, partly due to the economic crisis in the publishing sector in the immediate post-war period. The manuscript faced several refusals by other publishers before being issued by Amsterdam-based Uitgeverij Contact. Version C ended up being a highly edited text that underwent “two major phases of redaction” (Shandler 2012, 27), first by Anne and then by her father. These redactions “involved more than one language and editorial hand, and they were prepared for different readers” (Shandler 2012, 30). The whole editing process was influenced by numerous factors, including emotional ties, cultural and ethical considerations, linguistic nuances, and economic factors. Otto Frank’s extensive networking combined with his business capability and marketing skills, which were previously applied to pectin production in Amsterdam, were effectively transferred to managing the diaries, as noted by Kuitert (2007, 26). This aspect emerges clearly from various letters written by Otto Frank to publishers and friends. Unfortunately, the diary was presented as a single integral work, without any clarification about its complex editing history, which later led to misunderstandings and doubts about its authenticity. As shown by later studies, Otto Frank had made changes to the text, also censoring some parts or references for personal or ideological reasons (see, among others, Cluff 2020; Lefevere 1992, 59–72; Melnick 1997; van der Stroom 1986). According to Van der Stroom, he had merged the two manuscripts with “extraordinary expertise” (op ongehoord vakkundige wijze) (1999, 67).

In 1986, to counter allegations of forgery and manipulation, *De dagboeken van Anne Frank* (The diaries of Anne Frank) was issued by the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation (known today as the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies), presenting three parallel texts—the original diary, Anne’s proposed book version, and the published version C—thus evidencing all omissions and changes. In 1991, a reader’s version was published. The Anne Frank Fonds, holding copyrights after Otto’s death, tasked German translator Mirjam Pressler with creating version D, based on the NIOD edition. This edition reinstated omitted passages from the C version, while adjusting the subtitle to reflect the correct start date.<sup>9</sup>

### The diary's gatekeepers abroad

It is not our intention to analyse in depth the pivotal role played by the first translations in English, French, and German for the diary's global dissemination. A discussion on the transfer function of these seminal translations within a multilingual, diachronic perspective will be the object of future research. However, to better contextualise the diary's transfer to Italy, and because translation efforts were present in Otto Frank's editorial interventions right from the start, we will briefly outline the translation dynamics that preceded the launch of the Italian translation. The Contact edition, later recognised as the classic text, was the source text for the initial translations, as well as for the Italian one. However, the translators worked on different versions or typescripts.

The first translation of the diary to be published was the French one, followed in the same year by the German translation (March and November 1950, respectively). The English translation appeared two years later, first in the United Kingdom, on April 30, 1952, and a few weeks later in the United States, on June 12, Anne's birthday ([Anne Frank Stichting n.d.-a](#)).

According to [Van der Stroom \(1986, 86\)](#), the French translation was most likely based on the first 1947 edition published by Contact. The German translation used as its textual basis the second typescript, edited by Albert Cauvern and Otto Frank, which was a more complete version than the official Contact version ([van der Stroom 1986](#)). The English edition had a more intricate editing history, including a first translation for the United Kingdom market that was subsequently discarded.<sup>10</sup> The new translation, based on the fourth or fifth reprint of the 1947 Dutch edition, was a slightly expanded version, as some passages censored by the Dutch publisher had been reincorporated ([Barnouw 2022, 34](#)). [Table 5.2](#) shows a chronological sequence of these translations.

*Table 5.2* Overview of the first French-, German-, and English-language translations of Anne Frank's diary.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Translators</i>	<i>Publisher</i>	<i>Place</i>
1950	French	<i>Journal de Anne Frank</i>	Tylia Caren and Suzanne Lombard	Calmann-Lévy	Paris
1950	German	<i>Das Tagebuch der Anne Frank</i>	Anneliese Schütz	Lambert Schneider	Heidelberg
1952	English	<i>The Diary of a Young Girl</i>	B. M. Mooyaart-Doubleday	Doubleday & Co. and Vallentine Mitchell	New York and London

The first-generation translators were non-professional, self-made mediators with no prior translation experience, often drawn from Otto Frank's personal network. Despite their lack of experience and translation expertise, these translators seemed to be deeply motivated by their role as custodians of Anne's cultural legacy. In later times, the German and French versions encountered criticism from translation scholars for mistranslations and misunderstandings, as well as from other scholars for omissions and additions (Noble 2013b; Schroth 2014; van der Stroom 1986, 86). Both translations presented numerous errors and stylistic problems, due to poor language and translation competence (Noble 2013b; Schroth 2014). Most of all, the German translator had been blamed for censoring and manipulation interventions, considered necessary to avoid offending the German readers (Rosenfeld 1991, 266–69; van der Stroom 1986, 86). It has been widely reported that the German translation systematically mitigated any adversarial references to Germans and German culture (Bar-nouw 2022, 30–32; Lefevere 1992; Ozick 1997; Schroth 2014; Spies and Feinauer 2011). In recent years, Mooyart-Doubleday's translation has also come under criticism, although "few critics have gone beyond the editorial choices to analyze the translations of the text themselves" (Cluff 2020, 16). Nevertheless, these pioneering cultural emissaries—supported by Otto Frank's extensive networking and editorial activities—managed to capture the attention of publishers and ensured the diary's global success.<sup>11</sup>

Approximately forty years after the publication of these classic editions, two new sets of translations were generated. To face the counter-narrative propagated by negationists, publishers in the three main transfer languages quickly released translations of the Dutch NIOD edition (1986): in 1988 in German (translator Mirjam Pressler), in 1989 in French (translators Isabelle Rosselin and Philippe Noble) and in the same year in English (Barbara Mooyart-Doubleday and Arnold J. Pomerans). When in 1991, publisher Bert Bakker issued the reader's edition (version D) in the Netherlands, translations followed quite soon again: in German (1991) by Mirjam Pressler, also co-editor of the Dutch version D; in French (1992), again by Noble and Rosselin; and in the United Kingdom and United States (1997) by Susan Massotty. The publishers remained the same, except for the German publisher Lambert Schneider, who in 1955 licensed Fischer Verlag to issue a paperback edition of *Het Achterhuis*, following Otto Frank's intention to increase sales (Anne Frank Stichting n.d.-a).<sup>12</sup> For these second-generation translators, the social and political contexts were significantly different to those of the early 1950s. But the main difference was that the diary had become a worldwide success. Unlike the initial series's translators, who acted as cultural gatekeepers despite their limited translation expertise and use of incomplete texts, the translators of the second wave of translations were acutely aware that they were translating a bestseller authored by one of the most famous Holocaust victims.

### The historical context of the diary's publication in Italy

The first Italian translation of the diary was issued in 1952 by Giulio Einaudi Editore. This publishing company was founded in 1933 in Turin by the twenty-one-year-old Giulio Einaudi, who was supported by prominent Jewish and non-Jewish antifascists, such as Leone Ginzburg, Norberto Bobbio, Massimo Mila, and Cesare Pavese. Thanks to this intellectual circle, Einaudi was known for being a prestigious and distinguished publisher right from the start. The founders of Einaudi were a group of friends united by their interest in literature and freedom. From its inception, Einaudi was based on an inseparable political and cultural intertwining. As Norberto Bobbio said, “Einaudi’s ostrich [the symbol of the publisher] never buried its head in the sand”<sup>13</sup> ([Einaudiroma.com](http://Einaudiroma.com) n.d.). In the 1950s and 1960s, the publishing house began to focus on the Nazi genocide, which was considered an essential topic by the left-oriented and antifascist intelligentsia of the time ([Gordon 2013](#), 59).

If we examine the years when the diary was published, it becomes evident that releasing such war testimonies was quite unconventional. While the immediate post-war years (1945–1947) saw a surge in publications about the war, this trend did not continue into the years between 1948 and the late 1950s. During this later period, the focus was primarily on memoirs concerning the partisan struggle. Accounts of experiences in concentration camps were rare and generally met with “distracted pietism”<sup>14</sup> by the public ([Calimani 2015](#), 657). The long editorial history of *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*), Primo Levi’s famous Holocaust testimonial, is a clamorous example in this respect ([Chiaberge 2020](#)).

Additionally, the country was in a state of great chaos: Italy needed to be rebuilt, Jews and other victims repatriated after the liberation of the camps or the end of the war had to be reintegrated into society, and confiscated property had to be returned to its original owners. The population was uncertain about the fate of the city of Trieste and the colonies that once belonged to the Italian colonial empire. Understandably, after five years of war and destruction, people wanted to move on and leave the horrors of the war period behind. Primo Levi himself said,

At that time, people had other concerns. They had to rebuild their homes and find jobs. Rationing was still in place; the cities were filled with ruins, and the Allies were still occupying Italy. People didn’t want to deal with this; they wanted something different, like dancing, having parties, and bringing children into the world. A book like mine, and many others that followed, was almost an affront, a spoiled celebration. ([Levi 1997](#), 1382)<sup>15</sup>

This might be one of the reasons explaining why the Italian translation of the diary had a long journey to publication. It was only in 1954

that publishing house Einaudi unveiled the first Italian edition, seven years after its Dutch counterpart and two years after the English-language version. It was translated by Arrigo Vita and prefaced by the Italian writer Natalia Ginzburg. In the afterword published in the Italian translation of David Barnouw's *The Anne Frank Phenomenon* (2022), historian Massimo Bucciantini analyses some fundamental parts of the editorial process behind the inaugural Italian edition, which we will discuss in the next section.

### The genesis of the first Italian translation

In this section, we combine Bucciantini's findings with new data obtained from archival research and expand this evidence with the knowledge we have acquired on the translation and editorial dynamics behind the diary's journeys to Germany, France, and the United Kingdom and United States. This allows us to obtain a more complete picture of the diary's early reception and adaptation of Anne Frank's narrative in Italy, confirming what we have already observed with the Dutch-, German- and English-language editions<sup>16</sup> regarding Otto Frank's close involvement in editorial and promotion processes, and how some steps undertaken by him were decisive.

As for the diary, "the name of Anne Frank had already been circulating in the rooms and offices of Einaudi for some time,"<sup>17</sup> although it is unclear since when exactly (Bucciantini 2022, 144). The first people to read the French diary, *Journal de Anne Frank*, were Einaudi collaborator Natalia Ginzburg and consultant and translator Paolo Serini. This might have happened already in 1950 (Bucciantini 2022, 144). Still, it took quite some time to introduce the book to the Italian public. At the beginning of the 1950s, the French literary agency Clairouin, enrolled by Otto Frank to operate in his name, attempted to promote the diary by contacting several major publishing houses in Italy, including Einaudi (see, for instance, their letter dated December 28, 1950, and Otto Frank's letter to Clairouin dated July 8, 1952). The contract between Otto Frank and Giulio Einaudi was signed in 1952, apparently in the second part of that year (Bucciantini 2022, 145; Maida 2023, 84). It seems obvious that this decision was encouraged by the diary's publication in the US (remember the date: June 12, 1952). Indeed, in a letter dated July 25, 1952, Clairouin's literary agent informs Otto Frank that he has insisted with Garzanti and Einaudi to "reconsider the question of an Italian publication."<sup>18</sup> In a letter dated September 3, the same agent communicated that Einaudi has made an "offre honnête" (honest offer).

From that moment onwards, direct epistolary contacts were established between Otto Frank and Giulio Einaudi. Frank's correspondence (in French) was mostly addressed to Giulio Einaudi, later also to

Einaudi collaborator Luciano Foà, and was essentially focused on editorial and business aspects. In his correspondence, Frank acted as a “father-businessman-editor”<sup>19</sup> (Bucciantini 2022, 146). He systematically signalled the new countries where the rights of the diary had been sold, and he even distributed copies of editions issued in other countries to potential foreign publishers.

But how can the gap of one year and a half between signing the contract and printing the *Diario* be explained? Was the delay due to translation problems? This does not seem to be the case. In a letter to Otto Frank dated February 7, 1953, Giulio Einaudi informed him that he had found a translator who already had translated other works for his publishing house. On May 29, 1953, Einaudi wrote that the translation was almost finished. Otto Frank does not seem to have had any correspondence with the translator, Arrigo Vita (1899–1976), but he met him and Einaudi collaborators during a visit to Turin in September (Bucciantini 2022, 147; Maida 2023, 84). Not much is known about Vita. He was a Jewish ophthalmologist who tragically lost his wife at Auschwitz (Scienza e Vergogna 2018). Vita was part of the circle of Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals living in Turin in the immediate post-war period, but already before the war, his home was a meeting point for progressive antifascists (Bucciantini 2022, 147). Being proficient in languages, especially in German, he sustained himself by working as a translator during Mussolini’s racial laws, which were promulgated in 1938 to exclude Jews from public offices and higher education. In the early 1940s he started as a translator for Einaudi, particularly of non-fiction, although his role as translator could not be officially recognised. His working language was German, but he also translated from Dutch. It is unclear how he had learned this language, but he did have some experience in literary translation from Dutch: he translated the historian Johan Huizinga’s *Erasmus* (Erasmus), which was released in Italy in 1941 by Einaudi (Maida 2023, 70–74).

The diary’s publishing delay in Italy might have been due to two specific circumstances: the authoring of the preface and economic problems, as well as, as already mentioned, a poor interest in Holocaust literature. In his letter to Otto Frank dated February 7, 1953, Giulio Einaudi proposed to use Eleanor Roosevelt’s (American) preface for the Italian edition. Instead, in a late reply on June 2—four months later—Otto Frank advised him to assign the writing of the preface to an Italian popular personality: “Don’t you think it would be preferable to ask a well-known Italian figure, someone widely recognised and popular?”<sup>20</sup> Following this suggestion, Einaudi’s choice fell on Alberto Moravia, recommended to Otto Frank by Foà as “our best novelist”<sup>21</sup> (letter of October 15, 1953, quoted in Bucciantini 2022, 147). Following Einaudi’s invitation on September 21, a very short reply from Moravia followed: “I will write the preface to Anna Frank’s book,

which I don't have in any language. Please send it to me. However, keep in mind that it won't be long because I have a lot to do."<sup>22</sup> Almost four months later, on January 12, 1954, Einaudi insisted with Moravia: "It only awaits your brief preface to be published."<sup>23</sup> But Moravia never delivered it. Meanwhile, Otto Frank's impatience grew, also for economic reasons: more than a year after the contract was signed, he had not yet received the agreed-upon amount. Eventually, Natalia Ginzburg was chosen to write the preface. She completed it in two weeks (Bucciantini 2022, 150).

The second problem, perhaps the biggest obstacle, was the economic crisis. Otto Frank apparently did not know that Einaudi had to face "severe financial hardships"<sup>24</sup> in the fifties (Bucciantini 2022, 149). The crisis lasted for years, until 1957, and a future bestseller such as Primo Levi paid the consequences. *Se questo è un uomo* was issued in 1958, four years after the *Diario*, while Levi's manuscript had been approved by Einaudi's editorial committee already in 1952 (Bucciantini 2022, 150).<sup>25, 26</sup> The economic crisis of the book publishing industry in the immediate post-war period was not only an Italian problem. Other publishers in other countries dealt with similar difficulties. For Kuitert (2007, 22), it was a "miracle" that the Dutch diary was released in 1947, despite the enormous paper shortage. The German publishing world struggled with economic problems as well (Anne Frank Stichting n.d.-a).

It seems reasonable to suppose that Otto Frank's decisive interventions and harsh tone—he even threatened to undertake legal actions—persuaded Giulio Einaudi to have the preface produced inside the publishing house. Ginzburg delivered the text on March 3, 1954. The book was published on March 17, 1954, under the simple title *Diario*.

In the editorial history of the diary in Italy, it cannot be ignored that the main figures actively involved in the editorial handling of this work, Luciano Foà and Natalia Ginzburg, were of Jewish origin. In her essay "La Corsara. Ritratto di Natalia Ginzburg" (The corsair: Portrait of Natalia Ginzburg) about the life of Natalia Ginzburg, Sandra Petri (2018) highlights the pivotal role played by this writer, one of the early associates of the publishing house, who staunchly advocated for the publication of the diary. According to Battocletti (2018), before its translation, Giulio Einaudi asked for a second opinion about this work from Foà's wife, Luisa, who was struck by it and expressed her unequivocal support for its publication: "Are you crazy to have doubts? It's an exceptional text"<sup>27</sup> (quoted in Battocletti 2018, n.p.). Ernesto Ferrero, former director of the Turin Book Fair, confirms:

Einaudi sometimes sought opinions from people outside the usual circle to get a different perspective. They had literary experts review scientific works, and vice versa. Natalia might have given a

favourable opinion; it's her kind of book, after all. At that moment, Einaudi might have sought another opinion, maybe expecting a strong debate, as he valued differing viewpoints. He was always wary of unanimous agreement. (quoted in [Battocletti 2018](#), n.p.)<sup>28</sup>

Einaudi's initial turbulent history with the diary would in the end reap rewards. The publisher's name has always remained linked to that of Anne Frank. This historical link is evident in the current Einaudi catalogue, which features not only Anne's writings but also various critical discussions of the diary, literary adaptations, and editions for young readers. The Einaudi brand has contributed significantly to Anne Frank's becoming a universal symbol in Italy, a key component of this country's collective memory.

### **The diary's reception in Italy and a never-made film**

The extent to which Anne Frank's name was known among progressive groups in Turin even before the Italian translation was published, thanks to the French edition, is further demonstrated by Italian plans to adapt the book into a film. In March 1951, Ada Gobetti, wife of the famous anti-fascist intellectual and journalist Piero Gobetti, invited screenwriter Cesare Zavattini to read the French *Journal de Anne Frank*. She was convinced that Zavattini would have found in these pages a new and exciting subject for a film. A noteworthy article by Rosa Claudia Storti published in the magazine *Oggi* on January 10, 1952—two years before the Italian publication of the diary—described it as follows: “In two years of captivity, a girl has written a masterpiece. This book is the moving diary of a little Jewish girl who died in a German concentration camp in 1945”<sup>29</sup> (quoted in [Bucciantini 2022](#), 153). It was evident that reviewers who were able to obtain the French edition had already acknowledged this work's potential for media coverage. Zavattini had to wait three years until the Italian *Diario* was published, since he had trouble understanding French. However, he sprang to the conclusion right at once that his friend Vittorio De Sica should make a neorealist film based on the narrative of Anne Frank. Through Giulio Einaudi's intervention (see the June 7 letter from Giulio Einaudi to Otto Frank), Zavattini reached out to Frank, sending him these poignant words (in Italian):

Mr. Frank, it was with deep emotion that I read your daughter's diary published by Einaudi. [...] Few books can be said to be so worthy of being distributed by the powerful communication medium of the film industry. There is no simpler and more universal way than this diary to say that one is against the war. I therefore believe that the figure of little Anne can come to the fore as a symbol everywhere. (quoted in [Bucciantini 2022](#), 157–158)<sup>30</sup>

Zavattini had no doubts: the diary was a great example of neorealism *ante litteram* (Bucciantini 2022, 159). Otto Frank was flattered by the proposal made by this famous screenwriter, but the Italian offer came too late. Frank was already involved in negotiations with a United States film producer, having signed a contract for a stage adaptation as well. Zavattini's letter also illustrates how he instantly acknowledged the function the diary could play in a moment where coming to grips with history was hampered by a too-recent past (Loewenthal 2019, 25–26). One can only wonder what kind of image of this German Jewish girl would have been disseminated across the world by an Italian neorealist film, had the Italian translation been issued earlier.

The diary achieved immediate editorial success in Italy, selling over 20,000 copies in just a few years and garnering numerous reviews in newspapers and magazines. Positive appraisals also came from notable writers and influential figures of the time, including writer Dino Buzzati. Anna Maria Ortese's (2015) review, initially published in 1954, pointed out that “there are books that you close and others that remain open [...] and books that gaze at the horizon. Anne Frank's diary belongs to the latter category”<sup>31</sup> (quoted in Bucciantini 2022, 154).

### Uniqueness of the Italian *Diario*

In our view, three factors make the *Diario* unique in the context of the inaugural translations of Anne Frank's diary: the quality of the translation, its preface, and its cover. As for the translation quality, in contrast to the French, German, and English translators, Arrigo Vita had a scientific background in medicine and a sound experience in literary translation, having already translated the Dutch author Huizinga and several books by Carl Gustav Jung. He started as a translator with Einaudi at the end of the thirties and resumed working for this publishing house shortly after the end of the war, alongside working as an ophthalmologist (Maida 2023). Moreover, he translated directly from Dutch,<sup>32</sup> unlike many inaugural translations of the diary in other countries, which used the German or the English version as original text (see, for instance, Cluff 2020, 24; Missinne and Michajlova 2019; Larsson-Toll 2021; Fernández-Gil 2019, 428).<sup>33</sup>

Another remarkable aspect is the preface. Compared with the Dutch, German, French, and English prefaces, the Italian one looks thorough and professional, since it was written by a person who combined her editorial expertise with a deep knowledge of the diary and the history of Jewish persecution. A comprehensive analysis of the prefaces in the English, French, Italian, and German versions is currently underway by the Trieste research unit. However, it can already be observed that in the Italian preface, Natalia Ginzburg (1954) addresses all the pertinent questions: the location

of the story (the centre of Amsterdam), the time frame (two years spent in hiding in the secret annex, followed by eight months in concentration camps), the identities of the eight refugees and the friends who assisted them, as well as the author's mood, character, and intellectual disposition. Ginzburg also describes the fate of the Jewish families in the secret annex, which mirrored the tragic destiny of many Central European Jews during the Holocaust. They have the sense of persecution in their DNA, "finding perhaps in their oldest memories shattered store windows, devastated and burned-out neighbourhoods" (Ginzburg 1954, xi).<sup>34</sup>

Without delving further into specifics, the opening lines of Ginzburg's preface, characterised by a distinctly essentialist style, are as follows:

Anne Frank's diary begins in June 1942. In June 1942, her life still bears some resemblance to the life of any young girl of her age. But we are in Amsterdam, Holland has been in German hands for two years, and the SS are going through houses looking for Jews. Anne has just celebrated her birthday. At the age of thirteen, she is extremely fluent in the language of the persecuted. She knows that she and her family must wear the Jewish star, that they cannot go to public places, that they cannot take the streetcar.

"Since the German invasion, the good times are through," Anne writes in her diary, "but so far for the four of us, things have gone quite well." The war, the food shortages, the Germans and the danger, in June 1942 Anne sometimes manages to forget all this, living rather joyfully, eating ice cream, twirling her bike, flirting with classmates, studying Greek mythology. Until the day the whole Frank family moves into the secret annex, trying to escape from the Germans and save their lives. (Ginzburg 1954, ix)<sup>35</sup>

As for the cover, the presentation is very simple: a red border surrounding a rectangle in white with the author's name, "Anne Frank," printed at the top and the title, *Diario*, centred in bold. There are no other remarkable details. The book does not show a photo or picture of Anne Frank, of her diary, or of the building where she hid, unlike in the English, French, and German prefaces. The Italian title is very different from that chosen for the French and German inaugural editions, where the author's name is incorporated in the book title: *Journal de Anne Frank* and *Das Tagebuch der Anne Frank*, respectively. The English title is depersonalised (*The Diary of a Young Girl*), but the name of the author is placed above it. As in the English edition, Anne Frank's name appears in the Italian edition above the one-word title. The *Diario* is listed as number 175 in a series of narratives and non-fiction works. The publisher's name, Giulio Einaudi, appears below on the cover: two words separated by the famous ostrich

logo, symbolising not only the publisher's public engagement but also its elegant style.

The Italian public got to know the author as Anna Frank. This seems to be due to a misinterpretation of Natalia Ginzburg, who erroneously thought that *Anne* was a French transposition of the name *Anna*. Although writer Italo Calvino, who had joined Einaudi some years before, signalled that the right name was *Anne*, it was too late for the publisher to change it (Bucciantini 2022, 151). That is why the name *Anne* appears on the cover of the inaugural edition, but in the foreword and in the core text, all entries are signed with *Anna*. This confusing use of the names *Anne* and *Anna* has continued for quite some time, and for many—maybe most—Italians the Jewish girl from Amsterdam remains Anna Frank.

### Conclusion

Much remains to be explored regarding the first Italian translation of Anne Frank's diary. This chapter has focused on the fascinating story of the genesis of *Diario* and the unique dynamics of its translation flow to Italy. We have tried to disclose the chain of events related to the production of the initial translation. We have traced how the translation journeyed from the periphery to the centre, facilitated by the mediation efforts of a pivotal agent: Otto Frank. His extensive personal network and proactive agency—amplified by his talent for business and marketing—played crucial roles in the successful dissemination of the diary, ensuring that it reached a broad and diverse audience in post-war Italy. The Italian example is a fine illustration of Otto Frank's approach in disseminating his daughter's diary outside the Dutch borders. As clearly evidenced by his correspondence, he worked constantly and systematically to sustain and promote the migration of the diary into other countries and new language areas. He contacted publishing houses personally, with the help of friends, or through the mediation of literary agents. The first border crossing of the diary was accomplished in a central country, France, through a Paris-based publishing company: Calmann-Lévy. By assuring a good book distribution, this important French publisher launched the diary onto the world scene. It is no wonder that it did not take much time for the French *Journal de Anne Frank* to find its way to progressive antifascist circles in Turin, long before an Italian version was produced.

It was through the concerted efforts of individuals like Giulio Einaudi and Natalia Ginzburg that the diary was introduced to the Italian public, who were still grappling with the aftermath of the war and the country's fascist past. Their editorial decisions, influenced by personal and ideological motivations, were instrumental in shaping the reception of Anne Frank's story in Italy. An interesting aspect that invites further investigation is the

role of Arrigo Vita, the first translator of the diary into Italian. Not much is known about his background and his contribution to this pivotal translation effort, leaving several unanswered questions about his influence and the challenges he might have faced during the translation process.

In conclusion, the story of the first Italian translation of Anne Frank's diary is "a multi-vocal process" (Bassnett 2017, 119). It is not merely a tale of linguistic adaptation but a complex narrative of cultural mediation, historical memory, personal agency, and editorial negotiations. It invites further research into the myriad of factors that influence literary translation processes and the ways in which translated texts contribute to shape collective memory in Italy and elsewhere.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter is the result of a joint coordinated effort on the part of the authors. For the sake of convenience, the article's sections have been divided as follows: Paola Gentile is the author of the paragraphs on the publication of the diary in Italy and the conclusion. Dolores Ross is the author of the first paragraphs on methodology, the diary's genesis in the Netherlands, and the first translations in French, German and English. All translations from Dutch, Italian, French, and German were made by the authors.
- 2 See for instance Onze Taal (2004) and Celine Vervaeke (2017).
- 3 The two-year project involves Dutch studies scholars from four Italian universities: Bologna, Padua, Rome (Sapienza), and Naples (L'Orientale). It is primarily funded by the Nederlandse Taalunie (Dutch Language Union).
- 4 Wolters (2019) explains how creating a literary foundation aligned with the Dutch government's soft power strategy. The government was eager to improve the Netherlands' reputation, which had been tarnished during the Indonesian struggle for independence. For an in-depth historical analysis of soft power efforts in the cultural sphere, see Carbó-Catalan and Roig-Sanz (2022).
- 5 Thirteen translations were supported by the DFL and fifteen by its predecessor the Literary Production Fund (Literair Productiefonds).
- 6 The first UK and US editions are based on the same text, translated by Barbara Mooyaart-Doubleday (the diary was the first translation commissioned to her), and they have been published shortly one after the other. The reason why we distinguish the first two Spanish-language translations is that they were produced by different translators and published in South America and in Europe, respectively. In 1952, a first Spanish translation was published in Argentina, perhaps not authorised by Otto Frank, translator José Blaya Lozano. The Spanish audience never had access to this translation. In 1955, a Spanish publishing house issued the first translation for the Iberian Spanish market, translator Maria Isabel Iglesias Barba (see Fernández-Gil 2019).
- 7 We are grateful to Menno Metselaar and Henny Brandhorst of the Anne Frank House for their assistance.
- 8 According to the UNESCO (2025) Memory of the World Programme, Anne Frank's diary is in the top ten of the most-read books worldwide. *Publishing Perspectives*, an online news medium for the international book industry, considers it as the most famous diary in the world (Nawotka 2012). According to *Smithsonian Magazine*, the diary "changed the world" (Christianson 2015, n.p.).

- 9 The complete digitised works of Anne Frank can be found at <https://annefrankmanuscripten.org/nl#manuscripten>.
- 10 This translation was in Otto Frank's possession, as disclosed in his letter dated November 4, 1947, to a certain Hirsch in Great Britain. In a letter addressed to Ms Reens, one year later (October 4, 1948), Frank explains that the English translation had been commissioned by him but was considered unsuccessful by his friends. For more information on the first translator, see [Bartlett \(2022\)](#).
- 11 Particularly, Otto Frank's letters to Rosey Pool, dated October 5, 1949, and to Ms Reens, dated October 4, 1948, testify to his intensive mediating efforts with German- and English-language publishers.
- 12 For the paperback edition, the original translation underwent revisions by Maria Honeit, who rectified numerous errors and imbued the language with a more "natural" feel ([Anne Frank Stichting, n.d.-b](#)).
- 13 Original text in Italian: "Lo struzzo che non mise mai la testa sotto la sabbia."
- 14 Original text in Italian: "distratto pietismo."
- 15 Original text in Italian: "A quel tempo la gente aveva altro da fare. Aveva da costruire le case, aveva da trovare lavoro. C'era ancora il razionamento; le città erano piene di rovine; c'erano ancora gli Alleati che occupavano l'Italia. La gente non aveva voglia di questo, aveva voglia di altro, di ballare per e-sempio, di fare feste, di mettere al mondo dei figli. Un libro come questo mio, e come molti altri che sono nati dopo, era quasi uno sgarbo, una festa guastata."
- 16 Not so much is known about the genesis of the first French edition. Otto Frank's correspondence on this matter seems to be rather limited and not characterised by the business style he later developed. For sure, the French translation acted as a fundamental transfer port, not only in Italy but also for the English-speaking market. It caught the attention of Meyer Levin, who then became an important supporter of the diary ([Melnick 1997](#)) and of American editor Judith Jones, who discovered the diary in Paris in a pile of rejected manuscripts and convinced her boss to publish it ([Dawson 2017](#)).
- 17 Original text in Italian: "Il nome di Anne Frank circolava ormai da tempo nelle stanze e negli uffici Einaudi."
- 18 Original text in French: "reconsidérer la question d'une publication italienne."
- 19 Original text in Italian: "padre-imprenditore-editor."
- 20 Original text in French: "Est-ce que vous ne croyez pas qu'il sera préférable de demander un personnage connu italien, connu et populaire."
- 21 Original text in Italian: "il nostro migliore romanziere."
- 22 Original text in Italian: "va bene per la prefazione al libro di Anna Frank che però non ho, in alcuna lingua. Ti prego di mandarmelo. Tieni però conto che non potrà essere lunga perché ho moltissimo da fare."
- 23 Original text in Italian: "Attende soltanto la tua breve prefazione per uscire."
- 24 Original text in Italian: "una grave crisi finanziaria."
- 25 Contrary to Anne Frank's diary, *Se questo è un uomo* faced opposition within the publishing house, particularly from Cesare Pavese and Natalia Ginzburg ([Chiaberge 2020](#); [Maida 2023](#), 83), who refers to Primo Levi's "notorious rejection by Einaudi" ("famosissimo rifiuto einaudiana") in 1947.
- 26 Bucciantini's account occasionally diverges from the evidence put forward by Chiaberge and Maida, although a detailed discussion of these discrepancies lies beyond the scope of this paper. Chiaberge maintains that the manuscript was resubmitted in 1955, rather than in 1952, while Maida contends that it was rejected by both Natalia Ginzburg and Cesare Pavese.
- 27 Original text in Italian: "Ma siete pazzi ad avere incertezze? È un testo eccezionale."

- 28 Original text in Italian: “Poteva capitare che Einaudi affidasse la lettura a qualcuno fuori asse perché gli interessava un parere non istituzionale. Faceva leggere di scienza ai letterati, e viceversa. Natalia avrà dato parere positivo, in fondo è un libro molto suo, e a quel punto Einaudi ne avrà chiesto un altro, magari pregustando uno di quei forti scontri dialettici che gli erano cari. L’unanimità lo metteva sempre in sospetto.”
- 29 Original text in Italian: “In due anni di prigionia una bimba ha scritto un capolavoro. Il commovente diario d’una piccola ebrea, morta in un campo di concentramento tedesco nel 1945.”
- 30 Original text in Italian: “Egregio signor Otto Frank, ho letto con profonda commozione il diario di sua figlia pubblicata dall’editore Einaudi. [. . .] Devo dire che pochi libri mi sembrano come questo degni di essere divulgati con il potente mezzo del cinema, perché non si può essere contro la guerra in un modo più semplice e più universale di così, e credo che la figura della piccola Anna riuscirà perciò a imporsi dappertutto come un simbolo.”
- 31 Original text in Italian: “Vi sono libri che si chiudono, ed altri che rimangono aperti [. . .] e libri che guardano l’orizzonte. Il *Diario* di Anna Frank appartiene a questi ultimi.”
- 32 Vita cultivated his knowledge of the Dutch language with constant care ([Maida 2023](#), 81).
- 33 Future research will involve an interlinguistic textual analysis of the original diary and its first translations into English, French, German, and Italian.
- 34 Original text in Italian: “ritrovando forse nelle loro più antiche memorie vetrine di negozi infrante, quartieri devastati e incendiati.”
- 35 Original text in Italian: “Il diario di Anna Frank ha inizio nel giugno 1942. Nel giugno 1942 la sua vita presenta ancora qualche rassomiglianza con la vita d’una qualunque ragazzina dell’età sua. Ma siamo ad Amsterdam, l’Olanda è in mano ai tedeschi da due anni, e le S.S. vanno per le case cercando gli ebrei. A tredici anni appena compiuti Anna conosce e parla con estrema naturalezza il linguaggio dei perseguitati: sa che lei e i suoi debbono portare la stella giudaica, che non possono frequentare locali pubblici, che non possono prendere il tram. / Dall’invasione tedesca ‘*i bei tempi sono finiti*’, scrive Anna nel suo diario, ma ‘*finora per noi quattro è andato discretamente bene*’. La guerra, le privazioni alimentari, i tedeschi e il pericolo, tutto questo Anna nel giugno ‘42 può ancora dimenticarselo ogni tanto, e vivere abbastanza gioiosamente mangiando gelati, volteggiando in bicicletta, flirtando con i compagni, studiando la mitologia greca, fino al giorno in cui tutta la famiglia Frank si trasferisce nell’*alloggio segreto*’, per sfuggire ai tedeschi e tentare di salvarsi.”

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**Part II**

**Transforming Texts:  
Translation and Production**



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## 6 Translating a *meisjesboek*

### Ideology and Norms in the Selection and Translation of Guus Kuijjer's *Polleke* into Afrikaans

*Mareli Swart and Ilse Feinauer*

The selection of children's literature for translation into Afrikaans depends on various factors determined by the target publisher and the sub-field of international children's literature of which it forms part. This research examined the selection process of the Dutch children's book series *Polleke* by Guus Kuijjer (2003), published in Afrikaans by Protea Boekhuis in 2017 as an anthology, as well as the rationale underlying the translation process. Little research exists on the translation of Dutch literature for children and young adults into Afrikaans and on the role of the norms and ideologies in the selection process. The chapter thus seeks to understand how Protea Boekhuis's translation and production norms influenced the selection process, in the light of Gideon Toury's (2012) norm theory. An important additional consideration is the influence of the Dutch Foundation for Literature (DFL; Nederlands Letterenfonds) on these norms in selecting *Polleke* (Kuijjer 2017). This qualitative research investigates both the process of selecting this text for translation, and the role it was envisaged to play in the Afrikaans target market. Interviews with the Afrikaans translator, Martjie Bosman, and the editor of the translation, Shané Kleyn, reveal that the themes of the source text did not influence its selection. Rather, the text was chosen for translation based on its literary status and the availability of DFL funding in accordance with their conditions.

Protea Boekhuis already has an established commitment to publishing Dutch literature in translation, specifically into Afrikaans. Currently, it is the largest independent publisher in South Africa not tied to a bigger media group. Protea Boekhuis is also the most prolific publisher of children's and youth literature translated into Afrikaans, mostly from Dutch (Williams 2020, 291). Because Protea Boekhuis is an independent publishing house, its owner and publisher, Dr Nicol Stassen, can independently take decisions on what source texts to select for translation. The downside to this is the absence of significant stores of economic capital that conglomerate publishers often have. This is in part why Protea Boekhuis relies

strongly on the DFL and Flanders Literature (FL; Literatuur Vlaanderen) for translation funding (Williams 2020, 338).

Guus Kuijer is an award-winning Dutch author of literature for children and adults. In 2012, he won the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award<sup>1</sup> for his writing for children, and he has won the Gouden Griffel, the most highly esteemed prize for children's literature in the Netherlands (Nederlands Letterenfonds n.d.), four times. Kuijer's *Polleke* series consists of five books: *Voor altijd samen, amen* (1999; Together forever, amen), translated into Afrikaans as *Vir altyd saam, amen; Het is fijn om er te zijn* (2000b; It's nice to be here), translated into Afrikaans as *Dit is 'n fees om mens te wees; Het geluk komt als de donder* (2000a; Happiness comes like thunder), translated into Afrikaans as *Geluk kom soos 'n donderslag; Met de wind mee naar zee* (2001b; To the sea with the wind), translated into Afrikaans as *Saam met die wind na die see*; and *Ik ben Polleke, hoor!* (2001a; My name is Polleke!), translated into Afrikaans as *Ek is mos Polleke!* The series was published as an omnibus edition in the Netherlands in 2003, and in Afrikaans in 2017.

In the first *Polleke* book, Kuijer introduces the reader to eleven-year-old Polleke, her environment, and the people in her life, such as her parents (who have separated), teachers, and friends. The book follows the development of the newfound relationship between Polleke's mother and teacher, as well as the demise of Polleke's first romantic relationship with a Moroccan boy named Mimoen. In both the first and second books, the drug addiction of Polleke's father features prominently. Polleke tries to process this and manage her added responsibilities while also trying to help her father choose a better path. A new classmate, Consuelo, from Mexico, joins Polleke's class in the third book. In the fourth book, Polleke's father returns from Nepal after overcoming his addiction, and her mother and teacher finally marry. Polleke also hears that her grandfather has fallen ill. In the final book of the series, Polleke processes her grief after her grandfather's passing while navigating puberty and starting the transition from girlhood to young womanhood.

### Theoretical framework

*Polleke* may be regarded as a modern *meisjesboek* (girls' book). Van Lierop-Debrauwer and Bastiaansen-Harks (2005) provide a foundation for analysing the features of the genre, as well as its implicit norms and values. To be classified as a *meisjesboek* implies a target audience largely consisting of girls. Books in this genre typically follow a chronological order and tell the story of the protagonist's everyday life (Holtrop 1990, 411). According to Van Lierop-Debrauwer and Bastiaansen-Harks (2005, 42), a *meisjesboek* traditionally deals with the transformation of rebellious pubescent girls into

young women. The traditional *meisjesboek* started changing from the 1980s as the focus moved towards the development of the protagonist's personality (van Lierop-Debrauwer 2004, 102). In more modern *meisjesboeken*, the protagonist is no longer forced to choose a single role but can make her own choices (van Lierop-Debrauwer and Bastiaansen-Harks 2005, 42). In Afrikaans, similar *meisjesboeken* were published, such as *Die ongelooflike avonture van Hanna Hoekom* (The incredible adventure of Hanna Hoekom; Van der Vyver 2002) and *Lien se lankstaanskoene* (Lien's flip flops; Van der Walt 2008), which present strong female protagonists to adolescent readers appealing to more than only girls (Geldenhuis and Anker 2018, 367). These readers are often drawn to female protagonists who are not stereotypical depictions of girls or young women (Heinecken 2013, 110).

An initial reading of the source and target texts of *Polleke* reveals several themes not often explored in Afrikaans literature for children and young people. This is where the theoretical framework of descriptive translation studies becomes relevant, specifically the work of Toury (2012, 6), which highlights that translations are not created in isolation, but are produced to meet the needs of a specific cultural environment and to fill certain gaps. Our case study draws on McMartin's (2020) research into the export of Dutch literature in translation, which identified children's literature as an important export genre (145). McMartin (2020, 145) then appraises the translation subsidies and the quality standards maintained by the DFL and FL, as well as the way in which these subsidies influence the export of translations by reducing the financial risk for independent translation publishers such as Protea Boekhuis. Children's literature selected for translation is thus subject to a range of factors in the course of the selection and production process, during which publishers apply different norms and ideologies that influence these processes. These include the initial and preliminary norms accepted by the publisher, editor, and translator regarding the translation process (Toury 2012, 79, 82; see "Methodology" section). *Polleke* is one of twenty-nine Dutch texts, and the second by Guus Kuijer, that Protea Boekhuis has had translated and published (Shané Kleyn, e-mail correspondence to authors, September 20, 2021; Williams 2020, 526–28).

### *Children's literature in (Afrikaans) translation*

Within the Afrikaans literary system, *Polleke* can be classified as a children's book for older readers (aged nine to twelve), because its language use and length are not suitable for beginner readers. Translating children's literature is difficult, partly because of the asymmetrical nature of the communication, since the process involves adults (including translators) transmitting certain texts to children, which conveys dominant values, norms,

and ideals (O'Sullivan 2009, 1). The selection modes in international children's literature are simultaneously linked to the ideological power structures that both motivate and constrain such writing (Williams 2020, 340). Williams (2020, 341) found that Afrikaans publishers publish children's books that are most likely to be purchased by adult intermediaries (parents and teachers). These adults are part of the market, repertoire, and institution of the youth literature system to which Fouché (2012, 99) refers. Therefore, these adults (publishers, translators, and caregivers) determine what appropriate literature entails for the Afrikaans child, through, among other things, publishers' choices during text selection and associated translation strategies adopted during the translation process (Fouché 2012, 99; Williams 2020, 341).

It is also necessary to consider the differences in the cognitive development and value systems between the source and target readers during the translation of children's books. Every translation thus demands a tailored approach to ensure that the book becomes as suitable as possible for the target culture, if that is what is required of the translator. According to Shavit (2009, quoted in Cruz 2015, 124), translators of children's books generally have more freedom to manipulate texts because, compared to adult fiction, this genre lies on the periphery of the literary system. However, translators must still respect certain principles when translating for children, namely, that texts be suitable and even beneficial to readers in the target culture, as well as appropriate for their reading and cognitive abilities (Shavit 2009, quoted in Cruz 2015, 124). Oittinen (2006) therefore contends that translators must make the child the central consideration in the translation process.

Given the asymmetrical nature of the communication in literature for children, it cannot only be associated with the social function ascribed to it, namely, to cultivate a love of reading in children. It also serves to expose them to the general norms and values of a specific culture through this genre (Cruz 2015, 128). O'Sullivan (2009, 13) notes that social, cultural, and educational norms are inscribed in the texts. If the respective norms of the source and target cultures are in conflict at the time, the result can entail manipulation of, changes to, or omissions from the source text (Cruz 2015, 129; O'Sullivan 2006, 98). Children's literature therefore helps to convey certain cultural or social practices to readers, whether in translation or not.

Translating the work of international authors (such as Kuijer) into Afrikaans can fill gaps in the Afrikaans literature for pre-adolescent readers, while it is assumed that translated texts remain faithful to the content and style of source texts. But depicting source cultures following source-culture norms can be alienating to target-text readers (Venuti 1995, 25). Cruz (2015, 131) maintains that translated children's books can fulfil their intended function in target cultures only if the culture-specific content of

source cultures is conveyed clearly to young target-text readers. Such content includes fictionalised accounts of how young people of other cultures live and their interests, world views, and environments. In some instances, the contents of source cultures—for example, cultural practices or social behaviour—must be foregrounded in translations for children. Translators of children’s books must thus be familiar with the languages, literatures, and cultural values of both cultures, as well as the respective world views and living spaces, and the norms, conventions, and values of the young readers (Cruz 2015, 129).

In some cases, children may encounter specific contexts in their reading for the first time. This can lead to what O’Sullivan (2005, 80) terms “foreignness” in children’s books—anything children have never been exposed to before or experienced themselves. Children must thus work around these matters or topics, as well as experience and ultimately understand them. According to O’Sullivan (2005, 80), it is desirable for target texts to contain certain elements that young readers have not yet encountered or elements with which they are unfamiliar or uncomfortable. This helps to expand their knowledge of the world, provided the content is suitable for the target readers. O’Sullivan (2005, 81) argues that children must find elements of a foreign culture stimulating or surprising, and these elements should spark inquisitiveness or be informative, even though a word of explanation will be needed in most cases.

Our study aims to demonstrate that the publication of *Polleke* in Afrikaans was likely influenced by differing norms and contexts in the source text, intending to introduce the target audience to the European world of the Netherlands, where the protagonist Polleke lives. The range of views held by the characters in the text about their respective personal spaces and how these perspectives influence them as well as Polleke are important, because this could have motivated the publisher during the text-selection process. There also could have been other contextual factors, such as an economic consideration (funding by the DFL) that led to the materialisation of *Polleke* in Afrikaans.<sup>2</sup>

Saif (1995, quoted in O’Sullivan 2005, 81) contends that children are often not alienated by unusual, unfamiliar environments or objects in texts because children’s literature depicts children’s experiences. Whatever is culturally foreign to child readers is not necessarily a stumbling block. O’Sullivan (2005, 82) suggests this is because children often do not realise they are reading a translation. So instead of focusing their attention on differences at a literary level, the things with which they identify and what they absorb are often cross-cultural subjects, such as the course of life, sexuality, emotional expression, relationships, and religion or spirituality.

Children may recognise additional foreign cultural elements (time, place, natural environment, customs, history, cultural heritage) in a text,

which the young reader likewise can absorb and integrate into their expanding knowledge of the world. This is possibly why Polleke's European and Dutch background, and details like her being in a relationship with a Moroccan boy, are not necessarily unsettling for the modern Afrikaans child readers, as post-apartheid South Africa has become more accepting of migrants and people of all races. The earlier norm of the core family consisting of a heterosexual married father and mother has also changed into the new norm of blended families (as depicted in *Polleke*) and extended families.

However, translators of children's literature are often guided by their own child image (O'Sullivan 2006, 108). According to O'Sullivan (2006, 109), a translator's child image can be the most influential factor in determining translation strategies for children's literature. This implies that translating a text intended for children is influenced by various perspectives, including the translator's own cultural, social, and linguistic background, and their specific child image apart from that of the source-text author. Other relevant aspects include the linguistic capacity of the child audience and their experience of the world around them, which may differ from those of the (typically older) author or translator. These features—ranging from the translator's background and child image to assumptions about child readers—will be examined in the analysis. In addition, we will consider whether and how the text has been adapted for the Afrikaans audience, and whether such adaptation was part of the translation commission or the result of the translator's child image.

## Methodology

In line with the lifecycle framework outlined in the introduction to this volume, this study can be understood as a case study (Denscombe 2010) aimed at tracing the production and reception of a recently translated Dutch book. Taking *Polleke* is its case, it examines the practices of relevant actors and institutions involved in the various phases of the translation lifecycle—such as selection, acquisition, creation, production, and reception. Semi-structured online interviews (see Baker and Saldanha 2019; McIntosh and Morse 2015; Wengraf 2001) were conducted with the translator Martjie Bosman (e-mail correspondence to authors, October 7, 2021, and January 18, 2022) and the editor Shané Kleyn (personal communication, October 20, 2021, and November 1, 2021). The goal of the interviews was to shed light on several aspects of Protea's translation and editorial practices, including the circumstances surrounding the acquisition of translation rights for *Polleke* from the Dutch publisher and the application for a translation subsidy from the DFL. Prior ethical clearance for these interviews was obtained.<sup>3</sup> The interview questions aimed to

pinpoint respondents' role during the selection and translation of *Polleke*. Protea Boekhuis was informed beforehand about the research aim, specific questions, role of the interviews, and potential interviewees. Once the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed, analysed, and grouped thematically according to the research questions. This information was used to draw conclusions about the selection process of *Polleke* (Kuijjer 2003), as well as to determine the key factors in this process and how they influenced the translation. Specifically, Toury's (2012) translation norm framework was applied to determine the role of the norms espoused by Protea Boekhuis and the translator concerned during the selection and translation of *Polleke* (Kuijjer 2003), as well as the DFL's role during these processes.

### *Toury's translation norms*

According to Toury (2012, 67–68), from a sociological perspective, a translated text cannot be separated from the target context in which it is situated and must function. In turn, the translator's or publisher's choices are shaped by their own underlying language norms, regardless of the socio-cultural context within which these choices are made. Furthermore, these decisions are often influenced by more than one norm. Toury (2012, 76) explains that the range of norms available requires the translator or publisher to select the best translation options for that particular instance. He makes a distinction between initial norms and preliminary norms, which we discuss in detail below.

Toury (2012, 79) describes initial norms as those affecting the conscious or unconscious choices when coping with two competing constraints that influence translation practice, namely, the respective underlying standards of the source and target cultures. The implication is that translators must decide at the beginning of the translation process whether to accommodate predominantly the source text's norms in the translation or whether the target culture's norms will shape the translation. It is important to note here that translators do not act independently—their translation choices are also determined by the agreed-upon translation specifications and the target-text manager's expectations. Contracts, such as the one signed between the DFL and Protea Boekhuis, could also specify the extent to which the target text may diverge from the source text. If the translation is predominantly oriented towards the selected source text, the translation process will be influenced by choices attempting to reflect source-culture norms in the target text. However, the cultural norms, characteristics, and traditions in the source text may conflict with the practices and traditions of the target culture. This may lead to adaptations, which may vary depending on the nature and relationship between the source and target

norms. Regardless of the cultural distance between the texts, elements in the source text will inevitably be changed and restructured to make them more suitable for the target text, especially if translators initially decide to prioritise the norms of the target language. Williams (2020, 317–18) states that the initial norm for translating children's books in Afrikaans shows a preference for a domesticating translation strategy. This allows cultural markers (which may hinder readers' access to a text) to be changed, resulting in a more target text-oriented translation approach.

Toury's (2012, 82) preliminary norms refer to norms regarding (1) the publishers' translation policy and associated principles and (2) their willingness to translate texts from a language other than the original source-text language (indirect translation). For Toury (2012), translation policy represents the factors that determine which texts may or should be transferred into a target culture or language through translation at any given time. According to Williams (2020, 218), one preliminary norm that characterises South African publishers of translations into Afrikaans is their reluctance to select and translate books that might be sensitive in the Afrikaans market, including books that deal with unfamiliar cultural milieus and traditions. *Polleke* may be considered thematically controversial in the context of Afrikaans children's literature because it deals with themes that do not regularly appear within Afrikaans children's frame of reference and deals with sensitive issues (for example, *Polleke*'s father's drug abuse).

Translation norms indicate that translation choices are not made randomly but rather are influenced by other, text-external factors.<sup>4</sup> This study intends to supplement research on translation policies by examining how the choices made in selecting Kuijser's *Polleke* (2017) for translation were influenced, and even constrained, by the DFL's own translation policy during the process of intercultural transfer from Dutch to Afrikaans. Differences in policies can arise from differences between the subgroups on matters such as the type of text (for example, literary or non-literary), medium of transfer (such as written or oral), and the human agents or groups involved (for example, different publishers, state institutions, and the translator's general training and experience) (Toury 2012, 82).

## Results

With Toury's initial and preliminary norms as a point of departure, the process of selection and translation of Kuijser's *Polleke* was investigated, along with the norms and cultural content that influenced the process. As mentioned, a qualitative case study was carried out by conducting semi-structured interviews with the translator of *Polleke*, Martjie Bosman, and the text editor, Shané Kleyn. The interviews facilitated a dialogue with existing literature on translated Afrikaans children's literature.

This section discusses the various aspects that influenced the text's selection and production. It was found that the text was selected based primarily on Kuijer's prestige and success as author. The source text's success is usually considered as one of Protea Boekhuis's preliminary norms—this also became apparent from the interviews. The DFL also played a significant role in the translation, since the target-text publisher was bound to certain specifications with respect to the translation approach or initial norm. Additionally, the interviews raised questions about the influence of the source text's themes during the selection of *Polleke*, which is discussed below.

### *Influence of the themes on the selection process*

Some interview questions explored whether the story's themes influenced the selection process. Both Kleyn, the text editor, and Bosman, the translator, agreed that the themes did not impact the process of selecting *Polleke* for translation. Kleyn notes that “it often happens (fortunately) that certain themes (for example, the non-traditional family structure, socio-economic problems, or racial tensions) may also speak to a child from a Third World country,”<sup>5</sup> especially in South Africa. While thematic issues were not a factor in Protea's selection process, they may be regarded as beneficial for the market if they connect meaningfully with an audience.

Kleyn and Bosman confirmed that *Polleke* was chosen based on the source text's literary status and reception in its country of origin. Kleyn commented that, unlike Afrikaans children's books, difficult themes and taboos are introduced in the Netherlands as early as in baby and preschool books and then pursued further in books for older children, such as *Polleke*. Bosman pointed out that she “thinks Afrikaans literature has not yet reflected as many sensitive issues as in the Dutch text.”<sup>6</sup> But this does not mean that target-text readers are unfamiliar with these subjects in their everyday lives or other media. While the content was evidently not a key factor in the selection process, child readers may still relate to it, because they often identify with characters through universal topics (O'Sullivan 2005, 82). In *Polleke*, this is reflected in the portrayal of Polleke's transition into puberty, which categorises the text as a *meisjesboek* (van Lierop-Debrauwer and Bastiaansen-Harks 2005, 42).

Themes in *Polleke* include non-traditional family structures, drug abuse, and a multicultural and religiously diverse society—themes that do not commonly feature in Afrikaans books for this target audience (see Vos et al. 2020). Although thematic questions did not influence the selection, differences in the source and target cultures could have motivated the choice of this text. The source-text content provides insights into Dutch culture and how certain social issues are addressed and even accepted in that socio-cultural context, including ideas about religion, other cultures,

family structures, and substance abuse. The ideology implicit in the Dutch source text may well influence Afrikaans target-text readers willing to accept and adopt this and other forms of socio-cultural behaviour (O'Sullivan 2005, 70; Stephens 1992, 47).

Protea's approach to controversial themes contrasts with Williams's (2020, 218) findings on the way that Afrikaans publishers handle contentious issues, which suggests that publishers manipulate the text through domestication, neutralisation, or omission. *Polleke*, instead, offers readers an experience that stimulates curiosity by giving insight into another culture and country without it being blurred by Protea's translation strategies (O'Sullivan 2005, 80). The content of the texts selected by Protea for translation could unwittingly create a particular cultural context with which the publisher becomes associated, because the target-text market is unaware of the factors that influence Protea's selection process, namely, the status of the author and source text. However, as mentioned earlier, the source-text themes are not unfamiliar to modern Afrikaans-speaking children.

#### *Influence of Kuijer's status as an award-winning Dutch children's book author*

Kleyn was uncertain about the reasons for choosing Kuijer's *Polleke* (2003) to translate into Afrikaans but presumes it was tied to a press release from the book's publisher in 2012. The announcement reported on Kuijer's winning the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Prize in 2012, suggesting that the selection was based on the author's status in the source culture, and particularly his having won a prestigious award, rather than any considerations of the text's content. Kuijer's status and numerous prizes contribute to the symbolic capital of his published works, increasing the chances of his texts being selected for translation into other languages (Sapiro 2016, 12). Literary prizes thus play an important role in advancing both an author's and a publisher's status. The prestige of the prize also determines the impact on the publisher (Sapiro 2016, 12). Kuijer's accolades benefit Protea Boekhuis because the publisher becomes associated with an author who has received the most prestigious prize for children's literature.

According to Kleyn, an offer for the translation rights to Protea Boekhuis's first Kuijer text, *Het boek van alle dingen* (2004; *The book of everything*), came during the Frankfurt or Bologna Book Fair<sup>7</sup> in 2012 or 2013, from where Luciënne van der Leije<sup>8</sup> sent Protea Boekhuis a copy of *Het boek van alle dingen*. Kleyn said that the Protea team involved in publishing this translation (Kuijer 2015) was "very impressed by *Het boek*."<sup>9</sup> The offer for the translation rights to *Polleke* (Kuijer 2003) was submitted before Protea Boekhuis had sales figures for the first text, and negotiations

with Singel Uitgeverijen, the source publisher, commenced as soon as it was available.

The interviews with Kleyn and Bosman reveal that, generally speaking, Protea Boekhuis prioritised a source text's literary quality over its thematic content—especially if the author has received awards for the work. Kleyn also emphasises that Kuijer's status as a leading Dutch children's books author contributed to the text being translated, because "Protea is keen to publish classic texts,"<sup>10</sup> and Kuijer's work fits this category. The success of both the author and the source text as bestsellers clearly impacted the decisions of the target-text publisher. This aligns with Van Coillie's (2020, 143) contention that bestsellers can dominate the translation market and drive global distribution.

Protea Boekhuis's approach highlights the asymmetrical process of translating children's books, where adult publishers—with their implicit social, cultural, and educational norms—select what is made available to young readers (O'Sullivan 2009, 1, 13). These norms can influence young readers who are still developing their own thinking patterns, modes of expression, and moral values. Although Oittinen (2006, 84) argues that child readers should be central in translations intended for this target audience, *Polleke's* selection strategy was more focused on the publisher's accumulation of symbolic and economic capital (Williams 2020, 316), which seems to have been prioritised above other considerations.

Kuijer has won the Gouden Griffel (the most important prize for children's literature in the Netherlands) four times, the Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis twice, and the Woutertje Pieterse Prijs<sup>11</sup> for *Polleke* (Nederlands Letterenfonds n.d.; Williams 2020, 156). His position as an internationally renowned prize-winning Dutch author influenced the decision to select *Polleke* (2003) for translation into Afrikaans, which advances Dutch literature internationally and boosts the country's geopolitical status (Von Flotow 2007, quoted in McMartin 2021, 277). This is because the translation of texts by authors such as Kuijer demonstrates that the Netherlands can produce influential authors whose works win prizes and merit translation. (Kuijer's works have been translated into over ten languages.) The Netherlands's geopolitical status is further reinforced by translation subsidies that in turn enhance authors' international status and advance the country's position within the global literary system. This simultaneously grows the country's international symbolic capital and extends beyond national borders (Heilbron in McMartin 2020, 153) ensuring that Protea Boekhuis also accumulates additional symbolic capital in the sub-field of Afrikaans children's books translated from international source texts by publishing *Polleke* in Afrikaans in 2017 (Williams 2020, 317).

The text meets all three criteria that Nicol Stassen (owner of Protea Boekhuis) apparently applies in selecting and publishing texts: eligibility

for subsidies, sales figures for the original publication country, and any awards it has received (Hugo 2018, quoted in [van der Watt 2021](#), 92). Furthermore, *Polleke* is a realistic story and part of a series of children's books, which [Williams \(2020, 310\)](#) points out are factors that Protea Boekhuis regularly considered in their selecting process between 2010 and 2018. Stassen therefore aims to translate and produce a typical kind of text, namely, one that will boost the symbolic and economic capital of his publishing house. This may entail the application of genre preferences ([Childress 2017, 95](#)), but also certain requirements, such as Stassen's criteria.

The various factors influencing Protea Boekhuis's decision to translate *Polleke*<sup>12</sup> constitute the publisher's preliminary norms—in [Tourey's \(2012, 82\)](#) terms. Unlike other South African publishers and their preliminary norms (see above), Protea establishes their selection criteria prior to any decisions. *Polleke* may be considered thematically controversial in the context of Afrikaans children's literature, because it deals, inter alia, with sensitive issues such as drug abuse by Polleke's father. Furthermore, the offer for the translation rights to the text was submitted even before Protea had sales figures for their first Kuijer translation. As already stated, factors such as the status of the author as a prize-winner and the text being a bestselling Dutch text influenced the selection process, rather than the themes addressed in the source text. Protea Boekhuis thus has its own preliminary norms informing the processes of selection and translation ([Tourey 2012, 82](#)).

### *Protea Boekhuis's approach to translation*

In her interview, Bosman confirmed her twelve-year association with Protea Boekhuis, adding that she began as an editor there, working extensively with translations from several languages, including German, Dutch, and English. Even though Bosman had no formal training in translation, she offered to undertake translations for Protea because of her experience with their translation practices during her tenure as an editor for many of their translations.<sup>13</sup> She had translated the first Kuijer text, *Die boek van alle dinge* (2015), and was subsequently approved as an accredited translator by the DFL. Bosman was thus familiar with Kuijer's writing style and could translate *Polleke* in a manner consistent with the first text.

When asked about the translation brief and/or translation specifications and how closely she had to remain to the source text, Bosman responded, "I was not given any instructions."<sup>14</sup> This may stem from her extensive past experience with translations at Protea. As Kleyn put it, she "assumed that Bosman knew what to do."<sup>15</sup> It thus appears there was a level of trust between the publisher and translator because Bosman had worked at the publisher for twelve years before *Polleke* and knew their editorial processes well. Concerning the adaptation of the text for Afrikaans

target readers, Bosman stated that she “remains faithful to the text—that has always been my motto.” There was pressure to use more idiomatic Afrikaans in the translation, replacing Dutch-inflected expressions. This confirms Williams’s (2020, 318) finding that idiomatic language use is an initial norm for Afrikaans translation publishers. Although Bosman noted that “the integrity of the translator is relied upon”<sup>16</sup> not to change the text’s content, Kleyn pointed out that there are clauses in the contract that Protea Boekhuis signed with the original publisher, Singel Uitgeverijen, that stipulate the following:

No modifications to the text of the Proprietor’s edition shall be made without Proprietor’s written consent. The Publishers shall see that a faithful and accurate translation is made of the Work and shall send a copy of the translation in due time to the Proprietors, who will submit it to the author for his/her authorization.

Bosman’s approach to translation suggests that her lack of formal training in translation may have left her unaware of her agency as translator. Although this could be understood as a children’s book translator’s desire to silence her own voice to allow source cultural markers to emerge (Cruz 2015, 131), it could be Bosman’s attempt not to disturb the illusion of the translator as a transparent figure during the translation process (Lopes 2015, 85).

In this case, Bosman’s translation choices and target-text adaptation were influenced not only by her own preferences, but also by the contracts between Protea Boekhuis and Singel Uitgeverijen and between Protea Boekhuis and the DFL. According to Bosman, the DFL facilitated the signing of the contract between Protea and Singel, but Protea also had to sign a contract with the DFL. These contracts bound Bosman to remain faithful to the source text and not to make any adaptations to the content without written permission from both Singel and the DFL. The contract discourages translators from introducing their own voice into the translation and to some extent deprives them of their agency as translators, because the target text must remain true to the voice of the original author. Bosman was thus somewhat constrained to a certain translation approach. In cases where a more functionalist approach may have enhanced the translation, she lacked the authority to follow her instincts to translate the text to better suit Afrikaans target-text readers. If Bosman had been afforded greater agency during the translation process, she may have felt greater freedom to raise issues with content or language with the publisher, which could have facilitated discussions with the source-text publisher.

Bosman’s attempts to remain as close as possible to the source text, as well as Protea Boekhuis’s insistence on this, constitute the publisher’s initial norm. Toury (2012, 79) describes this norm as the choices made

regarding how close the translation should remain to the source text or how far the target text may diverge from the source text. This norm contrasts with Williams's finding (2020, 317–18) discussed above.

A comparison of the answers of both interviewees revealed the level of trust between the translator and editor. According to Bosman, she “sat and completed the entire manuscript and then sent the full manuscript to Shané,”<sup>17</sup> but Kleyn maintained they “were regularly in contact,”<sup>18</sup> worked together on finding solutions for the chapter headings, and tried to resolve other contract-related translation problems. What was regarded as minimal contact with Protea according to Bosman could be the result of her experience as both a translator and editor at the publishing house, where she formed her initial norms (Toury 2012, 79). She thus knew how the publisher approached subsidised translations and the associated limitations. Bosman never had direct contact with the author and claimed,

This is more or less the experience of [fellow Afrikaans translators] Lina Spies, Zandra Bezuidenhout and Daniel Hugo, who as far as I know also never had contact with the authors. (Daniel did sometimes have contact with Dutch authors, but I don't know if that was the rule or the exception.) The DFL is actually the intermediary that screens the translations if the publisher applies for funding.<sup>19</sup>

Although Bosman sees the DFL as the intermediary that ultimately screens the translation, the contract with Singel indicates that the source-text publisher and author also have a say in the final product. This can further hinder the translator from highlighting translation issues since three parties ultimately determine what adjustments may be made to the text. This multiparty decision-making process can become time-consuming by delaying the timelines of other projects and increasing the expenditure of the target-text publisher, even if the subsidy covers all expenses, as in the case of *Polleke*.

In terms of the contracts, Protea Boekhuis faces limitations both in the translation choices its translator is authorised to make and in the kind of texts they produce. The Afrikaans *Polleke*, for example, does not include the illustrations of the original text (Kuijjer 2003), since this would have required an additional fee not covered by the project's budget. Furthermore, the original five *Polleke* books were published as a single volume in Afrikaans. This could have been the result of the Dutch source text, which was initially sent to Protea in one volume. Publishing the books individually, as was done with the Dutch source texts, would have made overhead costs much higher. Consequently, the target text has fewer pages to print, because the source-text illustrations with *Polleke*'s poems have been omitted. Retaining the illustrations and poems was not critical because they

do not play the kind of multimodal meaning-making role in the reading process as they would in picture books.

Protea Boekhuis's approach to the translation of *Polleke* indicates that the complexity of translating children's books—such as the suppression of, or elaboration on, alienating source-culture markers (Cruz 2015, 129, 131; O'Sullivan 2005, 70)—was not necessarily considered. This is because the target publisher was bound by contracts and the translator also believed that the target text should remain as close as possible to the source text. Bosman's approach to translation may have been influenced by her history at Protea and her lack of formal training in translation, which might have limited her exposure to the range of approaches to translation that shape her initial norms. Bosman's approach to translation may well correspond to the letter of the contracts, but questions arise about the choices a publisher can make about the best way to translate a text for the market within which it must function and whether state agents such as the DFL should limit them in all cases.

#### *The role of the Dutch Foundation for Literature*

According to Williams (2020, 208), the DFL acts as a patron<sup>20</sup> that promotes the production and distribution of Dutch literature through its engagement with publishers in the Netherlands. This goes beyond recognising the status of the author and original text that prompted the translation, as the DFL also considers the text eligible for a translation subsidy, thereby promoting Dutch ideology (Williams 2020, 208). According to McMartin (2020, 159), this consideration significantly influences some foreign publishers' selection of Dutch texts for translation, particularly when the promise of a subsidy is factored into budgeting as a matter of course, as is the case at Protea Boekhuis. The source text consequently also becomes part of the larger corpus of translated Dutch texts subsidised by the DFL and FL to facilitate the transmission of this literature beyond the Netherlands and Flanders (McMartin 2020, 154; Williams 2020, 209). As both Bosman and Williams (2020, 209) point out, state agents such as the DFL make it enticing for Afrikaans publishers such as Protea to translate their books because they offer foreign publishers the means to translate more books at less risk (see also McMartin 2020, 159). However, while support of this kind may make a translation project possible, it may also force the publisher to make tough cost-cutting decisions, as was the case for *Polleke*: although the DFL subsidy covered all the costs for translating *Polleke*, Protea had to make adjustments to keep other production costs low, for example, by excluding the illustrations and publishing the series as an omnibus. Note also that DFL support is contingent on the foreign publisher selecting a DFL-accredited translator, which Bosman was.

In light of the above, it is worthwhile to consider the extent to which, through these various constraints, the DFL shapes Afrikaans translation norms. Arguably, the DFL determines which ideologies and values of the source culture may travel beyond the country's borders through their subsidising of certain translations and translators over others and of certain target publishers over others (Williams 2020, 208). These factors will presumably be manifested in the target text even if the values do not accord with those of the target culture, since they must feature in the text in terms of the contract between the publishers of the source and target texts, which the translator also signs (McMartin 2020, 155; Williams 2020, 208). Furthermore, the constraints on the foreign publisher—in this case Protea Boekhuis—and how they produce Dutch–Afrikaans translated texts will contribute to the image of the source culture's country, values, and people among target country readers. The Netherlands is often perceived as an open-minded country that emphasises individual freedom (Dodge et al. 2005, quoted in Vos et al. 2020, 610)—an image vividly present in *Polleke*, where the protagonist engages with others' various world views. The text thus reinforces this global image of the Netherlands, as indicated in Vos et al. (2020, 610).

These contracts furthermore ensure that the DFL remains involved in the translation's publishing process, with the Dutch author usually also being included in the contract, mediated by the DFL between the source-text and target-text publishers (McMartin 2020, 155). In the case of *Polleke*, Kuijer's approval of Bosman's translation was sought before it was ultimately endorsed for publication. The proofs were also sent back to the source-text publisher for inspection, allowing for retranslation if necessary to ensure accuracy and correspondence with the source text. Kleyn mentioned that Kuijer himself read the Afrikaans translation in 2016 and commented that the book looked beautiful and seemed well translated, taking into account his limited understanding of Afrikaans. Kuijer expressed his confidence and pride in the quality of the translation, because it seemed carefully and neatly prepared to him. The communication between the source-text and target-text publishers shows that Protea's selection and translation process had to adhere to various requirements—up to and including approval from the original author—before they could eventually publish the target text.

The power the DFL acquires through the signed contracts is indicative of its powerful position as a gatekeeper of Dutch literature globally. Its translation policy is meant to ensure that literature translated from Dutch is subject to certain standards and requirements, holding target-text publishers accountable for producing quality translations and incentivising this through mediation between source and target publishers and translation subsidies.

## Conclusion

This case study investigated what motivated Protea Boekhuis to publish Guus Kuijer's *Polleke* (2003) in Afrikaans by focusing on the translation norms that influenced the selection and translation process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the translator, Martjie Bosman, and the editor of the Afrikaans text, Shané Kleyn, to confirm the nature of the selection and translation process. The findings indicate that the themes of the source text did not primarily influence its selection. The investigation also highlights that the initial and preliminary norms (Touy 2012, 82) that influenced the process of selecting and translating *Polleke* differ from those identified by Williams (2020, 217–18) as impacting Afrikaans publishers' decisions to translate children's books from other countries.

The interviews highlighted that the selection and translation of the text in this case study cannot be viewed in isolation. The contracts between Protea Boekhuis, the DFL, and Singel Uitgeverijen specify that the source text's contents may not be adapted for the target culture without written permission. By constraining the target-text publisher and translator in this way, state agents (such as the DFL) can strengthen their position in the international literary sphere and more directly mediate what and who gets translated, by whom, how, and by which publishers. This power can be used to selectively project and build the symbolic capital of those authors and books they promote, as well as that of the country it represents. For its part, Protea gains from its affiliation with the DFL, because it is able to continue translating texts that align with its identity as a publisher of classic texts and texts that meet the selection criteria of the owner of Protea Boekhuis, Nicol Stassen (Hugo 2018, quoted in van der Watt 2021, 92).

Protea Boekhuis negotiated the translation rights for Kuijer's *Het boek van alle dingen* (2004) during the Frankfurt or Bologna Book Fair in 2012 or 2013. In contrast, the translation rights for *Polleke* (2003) were requested based on the positive impression the first Kuijer text left on the production team, as well as the status of the author and source text. The available translation subsidy determined not only whether or not the translation came to be, but also the kind of text it would become: while the subsidy for *Polleke* covered all production costs, it excluded the fee for the illustrations, making a single volume more feasible.

In short, the DFL's subsidy policy underwrites mutual benefits: Protea Boekhuis can include Dutch texts in their catalogue, while the DFL can fortify and expand its intermediary position in world literature. The publication is both an asset in Protea's catalogue and beneficial to Afrikaans target-text readers who can read *Polleke*'s story in their language. This modern *meisjesboek* has been transformed into a piece of children's

literature through which Afrikaans readers can experience the multicultural nature of Dutch society, while learning about and embracing different cultures, norms, ideals, and ways of thinking.

## Notes

- 1 The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award has been granted by the Swedish Arts Council since 2002. It is the most prestigious award for literature for children and young people worldwide. It is awarded to authors, illustrators, and storytellers based on their entire oeuvre ([Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, n.d.](#)).
- 2 See also [Van Coillie and McMartin \(2020, 11–37\)](#) for an in-depth discussion on the relation between text and context in the translation of children's literature.
- 3 Ethical clearance was obtained from the Departmental Ethical Clearance Committee in accordance with Stellenbosch University's ethical guidelines, as the case study is a low-risk research project involving human subjects in semi-structured interviews.
- 4 [Touy \(2012, 84\)](#) also posits a third category of translation norms, operational norms, which direct "the decisions made during the act of translation itself." Given our focus on translation selection, an analysis of operational norms falls beyond the scope of this study.
- 5 All quotes were translated to English by the authors. Original text in Afrikaans: "Dit gebeur (gelukkig) dikwels dat daar temas is (byvoorbeeld die niet-radisionele familiestruktuur, sosio-ekonomiese probleme, rassspanning, ens.) wat ook kan spreek tot 'n kind uit 'n derdewêreldland."
- 6 Original text in Afrikaans: "Dink die Afrikaanse letterkunde het nog nie so baie sensitiewe sake soos in die Nederlandse teks al weergegee nie."
- 7 The Frankfurt Book Fair and Bologna Children's Book Fair are two of the most important book exhibitions where Protea Boekhuis seeks translation rights. These fairs play an important role in selecting texts for translation (Stassen, in [Williams 2020, 70](#)).
- 8 Van der Leije is Protea's contactperson at Kuijer's publisher, Singel Uitgeverijen, with which Protea has had a longstanding relationship (personal communication with Shané Kleyn, November 1, 2021).
- 9 Original text in Afrikaans: "Baie beïndruk met *Het boek*."
- 10 Original text in Afrikaans: "Protea is gretig om klassieke tekste te publiseer."
- 11 The Woutertje Pieterse Prijs has been awarded since 1988 to the best original children's or youth book in Dutch that was published in the preceding year. Children's books that are exceptional in their use of language, genre, or themes are regularly considered for the prize, which strives to advance the quality of Dutch children's books ([Woutertje Pieterse Prijs, n.d.](#)).
- 12 The *Polleke* case study indicates that it is beneficial to examine a specific case and then compare it with a study drawing on a larger pool of participants ([Denscombe 2010, 61](#)).
- 13 At the time Bosman was translating *Polleke*, she was no longer employed full-time by *Protea* and worked on a freelance basis, with Shané Kleyn as the text editor.
- 14 Original text in Afrikaans: "Ek is geen instruksies gegee nie."
- 15 Original text in Afrikaans: "Het aangeneem Bosman weet wat om te doen."
- 16 Original text in Afrikaans: "Daar word staatgemaak op die integriteit van die vertaler."

- 17 Original text in Afrikaans: “Sy het gesit en die hele manuskrip voltooi en die volle manuskrip dan aan Shané gestuur.”
- 18 Original text in Afrikaans: “was gereeld in kontak.”
- 19 Original text in Afrikaans: “Dis min of meer die ervaring van [mede-Afrikaanse vertalers] Lina Spies, Zandra Bezuidenhout en Daniel Hugo, wat sover ek weet, ook nooit kontak met die skrywers gehad het nie. (Daniel het soms kontak gehad met Nederlandse skrywers, maar ek weet nie of dit die uitsondering of die reël was nie.) Die NFL is eintlik die tussenganger wat die vertalings nagaan wanneer die uitgewer vir befondsing aansoek doen.”
- 20 Patronage often has the following three components: an ideological component (prescriptions regarding choices, topics and forms of texts for publication), an economic component (financial payment or subsidy), and a status component (see [Williams 2020](#), 208).

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## 7 Translating “A Noble Stranger”

### The Belgian National Poet Charles Ducal and Intra-national Poetry Translation Flows from Dutch to French in a Multilingual Country

*Timothy Sirjacobs and Ewoud Goethals*

Belgium is a federal country composed of three language communities—Dutch, French, and German. It is often remarked that the two largest communities, the Dutch-speaking community (Flanders) and the French-speaking community (Wallonia-Brussels Federation), have limited knowledge of one another’s culture (Brems 2020). In 2016, challenging this perception, the francophone Belgian publisher Tétrás Lyre released *Lavis à l’encre* (Ink wash), an anthology of poems by the Flemish poet Charles Ducal (the pseudonym of Frans Dumortier), as part of its series of translated Flemish poetry, *De Flandre*. In this chapter, we explore how the work of this Flemish poet, who was also the Belgian national poet<sup>1</sup> from 2014 to 2015 and the most translated Flemish poet in the period 2014–2020, travelled from the Dutch to the French community via translation. Which actors played a role in the production and reception of Charles Ducal’s work in translation and, more broadly, in the translation of Dutch poetry within francophone Belgium? Considering the objectives of the book volume to which this chapter contributes, to what extent can the initiatives examined in this case be understood as constituting a literary translation policy?

To formulate a reply to these questions, we will rely on the work of translation studies scholar Reine Meylaerts, who is among the few scholars so far who have studied translation policy within a Belgian context. As Meylaerts (2011, 163) notes, the notion of translation policy often remains underdefined and therefore risks becoming a container concept “with little conceptual surplus value.” She defines *translation policy* as sets of translation management, practices, and beliefs or ideology. According to Meylaerts (2017, 46), the term *translation management* refers to legal efforts by the authorities to initiate, impose, or refrain from translation practices. *Translation practices* refers to the actual interlingual activity ensuring communication between authorities and citizens. *Translation beliefs* or *ideology* refers to the values assigned by members of a language group to translation and their beliefs about the importance of these values.

Whilst Meylaerts analyses “the role of language and translation policies for the construction and evolution of democratic citizenship in multilingual Belgium” (2017, 47) during the nineteenth century, we believe her tripartite approach to translation policy can be applied to literary translation policy in contemporary Belgium. We specify her model as follows to analyse literary translation flows: by *translation management*, we mean the policy tools such as translation grants implemented by state agents to initiate translations, but also cultural policies by different agents that promote or hinder translations in an (in)direct way. By *translation practices*, we refer to the cultural transfer activities of literary civil society organisations (CSOs) that foster translations, the editorial practices of publishers, and the activity of translating. By *translation beliefs*, we understand values and beliefs related to translations seen within the broader context of intra-Belgian cultural transfer, as well as the role of cultural diplomacy initiatives such as the national poet initiative, as we will discuss later.

In addition, Meylaerts (2017, 52) uses insights from complexity theory to show how translation policy “is a dynamic and self-organized process of interaction in which contextual pressures and individuals’ reactions to these pressures play an important role.” According to Meylaerts, translation policies emerge out of a social reality that is unpredictable and unstable, where agents act locally without having a coherent view of the whole, where the whole is different from the sum of its parts and causation between part and whole is bidirectional. In other words, translation policy consists of “a myriad of sometimes contradictory and unequally applied language and translation rules, practices and beliefs” (2017, 57). From this perspective, *Lavis à l’encre* is in no way the result of a single, coherent policy by one party. Instead, we will see how the translation of Ducal’s poetry within a wider intra-Belgian poetry translation flow emerged out of the complex interplay of three initiatives that together made its translation and reception in French possible.

First, we will look at the trilingual literary initiative Poète National(er) Dichter des Vaderlands (henceforth the “national poet initiative”) in which Ducal participated around the same time as the production of *Lavis à l’encre*. This initiative was the result of a collaboration between literary civil society organisations on both sides of the intra-Belgian language border. It established a contact zone between the poetry of both communities, and in this way enhanced the visibility of Ducal in francophone Belgium. We will then focus on the Brussels-based Passa Porta translator collective that was involved with both the national poet initiative and the Ducal anthology *Lavis à l’encre*. We will discuss the collaborative nature of these translations and see how a unique, collective type of “institutional translator” (Casanova 2002, 18) emerged from a multilingual institution: the international literature house Passa Porta. Thirdly, we will look at

the translation practices of the target publisher Tétrás Lyre and its series of Flemish poetry translations *De Flandre*, of which *Lavis à l'encre* is the fourth publication. We will discuss the editorial practices of Tétrás Lyre and the place of the *De Flandre* series in its catalogue. We will look at the selection of poets in the series, its paratext, and its promotion, and we will argue that this series constitutes a kind of repertoire formation. After discussing these three initiatives, we will see how they fit within the larger intra-Belgian poetry translation flows of this period. What percentage of the overall translation flow do they take from 2014, the first year of the national poet initiative, to 2020? Finally, by way of conclusion, we will discuss the extent to which this transfer is the result of translation policy. We will see how translations of Ducal's work are part of a translation flow that emerges from a complex, non-linear interaction between top-down translation management by state agents and cultural policy makers and, bottom-up, self-organised translation practices and beliefs of the literary CSOs and the target publisher.

### Poète National(er) Dichter des Vaderlands

The Dutch-speaking Belgian poet Charles Ducal was appointed as Belgium's new national poet in 2014, the first since Émile Verhaeren, who fulfilled the role from 1899 until his death in 1916 (Poète National(er) Dichter des Vaderlands [n.d.-b](#)). Yet, unlike his predecessor, Ducal was not state-appointed. And unlike in the time of Verhaeren, Belgium was no longer a unitary state with one single government, but a federal one consisting of a federal government for common affairs, three regions (Flanders, Brussels, Wallonia) for territorial affairs such as economics and infrastructure, and three language communities (Dutch, French, German) for personal affairs such as language and culture ([Van den Wijngaert 2011](#)). It is often observed that the Dutch and French language communities know little to nothing about each other's literature (see [Brems 2020](#)). Flemish literary journalist Dirk Leyman, for example, writes in the newspaper *De Morgen* in 2017 that "the literary language divide is not getting any smaller"<sup>2</sup> ([Leyman 2017](#)).<sup>3</sup>

Drawing inspiration from the national poet initiative in the Netherlands, a group of CSO-affiliated actors on both sides of Belgium's language border sought to counter this lack of mutual knowledge via the trilingual project Poète National(er) Dichter des Vaderlands ([Vandebril 2022](#)). Its mission was to launch a "literary exchange project ... [that] builds a bridge between the three language communities. It offers the three language communities a chance to get to know each other's poets" (Poète National(er) Dichter des Vaderlands [n.d.-a](#)) The aim, alongside popularising poetry and ensuring visibility for Belgian poets and their work within the other

language communities, was to create a contact zone between Belgium’s Dutch, French, and German language communities. In this way, it can be seen as a form of intra-national, civil-society-driven cultural diplomacy.

The literary CSOs involved came from both the Dutch- and French-speaking communities of Belgium. No CSOs from Belgium’s German-speaking language area are involved in the national poet initiative. For Flanders, these included the Antwerp-based literary organisation Vonk & Zonen, represented by Michaël Vandebril, who is also the coordinator of the literary city service Antwerpen Boekenstad. The Ghent-based organisation and expertise centre for Dutch-speaking poetry in the Low Countries PoëzieCentrum was represented by its then-director Carl De Strycker. On the francophone side, the initial partner was the poetry organisation Maison de la poésie et de la langue française, located in Namur, and its then-director Éric Brogniet. In 2015, however, David Giannoni became the francophone partner. He is the director of the poetry organisation Maison de la poésie of Amay, its associated publishing house L’arbre à paroles, and maelstrÖm reEvolution, a small Brussels-based publishing house specialised in contemporary poetry. In the same year, the Brussels-based organisations Le Théâtre Poème 2 and Les Midis de la poésie joined on the francophone side, as well as the Antwerp-based organisation Jeugd en Poëzie (Bertels 2020). A last partner is the multilingual Brussels-based international literature house Passa Porta, whose translator collective was responsible for the translation of the poems in all three national languages. It is important to note here the links tying together the three examined initiatives. As we will see further on, the members of the Passa Porta translator collective are associated with the national poet initiative as translators and with the De Flandre series as translators and, for some, editorial board members. Carl De Strycker of PoëzieCentrum also was an editorial board member of De Flandre from its first (Bogaert 2015, 4) to its last publication to date (Van Gasse 2019, 4). Moreover, during its lifetime (2015–2019), the series contained translations of both Dutch-speaking national poets up to that point: Charles Ducal and Els Moors.

The initiative was funded through various channels. It received grants from two Belgian organisations: the National Lottery and the Prince Philip Fund of the King Baudouin Foundation. The latter is a fund attached to a public charity foundation whose mission is to support “projects and the development of original initiatives to foster encounters and exchange between the different communities of the country”<sup>4</sup> (Prins Filipfonds n.d.). The Flemish Literature Fund (Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren, known today as Flanders Literature, Literatuur Vlaanderen in Dutch) and Promotion of Literature (Promotion des Lettres, known today as Direction des Lettres), respectively, the Flemish and the francophone Belgian literary state agent,<sup>5</sup> supported the project indirectly via their funding of the

literary CSOs involved. PoëzieCentrum, for example, had the explicit permission of the Flemish Literature Fund to devote a part of its resources and personnel to the project (De Strycker 2022). Later editions of the national poet initiative often received a grant from the cultural agreement between Flanders and the francophone language community (De Strycker 2022; Vandebril 2022). This bilateral agreement between the two language communities was established only in 2012, forty-two years after the first state reform, when the language communities were formed. Two missions of the agreement are to foster “reciprocal knowledge of each other’s culture and language”<sup>6</sup> and “collaboration between structures, organisations and cultural actors from both communities”<sup>7</sup> (Vlaanderen n.d.). One of the tools to accomplish these missions is a yearly call for projects, to which the national poet initiative responded.

During a two-year period, the national poet is expected to write a minimum of six poems per year on various topics of interest for a Belgian readership (Poète National(er) Dichter des Vaderlands, n.d.-a). In the case of Ducal (2015), the content of these poems ranged from social thematic (“Lied van de arbeid” [Song of labour]) to shared Belgian historical concerns/events, such as the remembrance of the First (“Soldaat 1914” [Soldier 1914]) and Second (“Bevrijding 1945” [Liberation 1945]) World Wars. Belgium’s status as an officially trilingual country meant not only that the content of these poems had to be relevant for all language communities, but also that these poems had to be published in the country’s three national languages: French, Dutch, and German. This led to translation becoming an integral part of the initiative, which was accentuated by the alternating of the regional and/or linguistic identity of the national poet.<sup>8</sup> Each national language is translated into the other two national languages, thus creating a contact zone between the three communities on the federal level. The publications of the poems and their respective translations were assured by three newspapers, each representing one language community: *De Morgen* for the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, *Le Soir* for the French-speaking part, and *GrenzEcho* for the German-speaking part. In addition, the national poet associates himself with several cultural and social initiatives and participates in literary events across the country.

After the inauguration of Charles Ducal in Passa Porta, which received a fair amount of media attention (Ducal 2015, 96), the project was initially met with misunderstandings arising from the word *national* on both sides of the language border. First, apart from occasional associations in France with the French Romantic author Victor Hugo (De Larminat et al. 2021; Doyen 2014; Launet 2014) and with the francophone Flemish author Émile Verhaeren in francophone Belgium (La Libre 2014; Le Vif 2014), the modern concept of national poet was absent in francophone Belgium and the European part of the Francophonie. This led to divergent

understandings of the initiative. The French-speaking Belgian poet Guy Goffette, for example, saw poetry as an international phenomenon. Therefore, the concept of a national poet, with its clear link to a single, national context, seemed rather paradoxical to him (Vandebril 2022). This sentiment was shared by the francophone literary journalist Jean-Claude Vantroyen: “Charles Ducal was officially enthroned as national poet for a year, a title that clearly has nothing official to it, as it was granted by PoëzieCentrum and Maison de la poésie”<sup>9</sup> (Vantroyen 2014). According to him, this made the project at once “derisory and anecdotic”<sup>10</sup> and “great and exciting”<sup>11</sup> (Vantroyen 2014). Even Charles Ducal (2015, 9) himself thematised the official connotations of his title at the start of his inauguration speech at Passa Porta: “*National poet*, doesn’t that sound a bit pompous?”<sup>12</sup> In addition, the title of national poet was understood alternately as having (Flemish) nationalist connotations (Ducal 2015, 96), associating the initiative with “revolutionary proletarian painters”<sup>13</sup> or even with the role of cantors in dictatorial regimes (Charrier 2014). Conversely, authors with separatist ideas, such as the poet Dirk van Bastelaere (Eeckhout and Daenen 2014), understood the national poet initiative as a project aiming to promote an idealised “hegemonic Belgicistic discourse”<sup>14</sup> and thus—in his opinion—worked against Flanders, as a “population group advocating greater autonomy”<sup>15</sup> (van Bastelaere 2014, n.p.). Van Bastelaere (2014, n.p.) further denounced the need for “crappy”<sup>16</sup> translations that such an “institutional farce”<sup>17</sup> generated, albeit before the first translation of any such a poem was made by the Passa Porta translator collective.

The lack of familiarity with the modern concept of national poets in francophone Belgium strengthened the initial unidirectionality of the project (De Strycker 2022). With the discontinuation of the collaboration between the Maison de la poésie et de la langue française de Namur and Éric Brogniet in 2014, the national poet initiative lost its francophone partner before the project had even commenced (Vandebril 2022). Without footing in the other language community, and with a Fleming that was largely unknown on the other side of the language border as its first national poet, the project got off to a false start, as Ducal testified in a retrospective text published in 2015: “Charles Ducal is a noble stranger in francophone Belgium. It cost me and the organisers almost a year before we saw the consequences of this. Invitations came in at a trickle. Where we wanted to build a bridge with our project, we ran into a wall”<sup>18</sup> (Ducal 2015, 100). After David Giannoni, the director of the Maison de la poésie of Amay, L’arbre à Paroles, and maelstrÖm reEvolution, joined the project in 2015 as the francophone partner, the idea was formed to let the next national poet, Laurence Vielle, act as an ambassador for Ducal in francophone Belgium. Vielle is a relatively famous poet in her language community. She opened doors for Ducal by performing together as a duo at literary

events in Wallonia-Brussels Federation (Poète National(er) Dichter des Vaderlands n.d.-a): “It turned out to be a fruitful marriage. The contacts multiplied, new literary organisations from Brussels and Wallonia joined the project and the trickle became a little stream”<sup>19</sup> (Ducal 2015, 100). In this way, Laurence Vielle acted as an important mediator for the reception of Ducal in francophone Belgium. Afterwards, Ducal also acted as an ambassador for Vielle in Flanders, restoring the bilateral character of the national poet initiative.

### **Passa Porta translator collective**

The translator collective associated with both the national poet initiative and *Lavis à l'encre* emerged from another literary CSO: Passa Porta, a multilingual international house of literature based in Brussels. The institution “strives relentlessly to make Belgian and international literature accessible within the context of Brussels and wants to reflect our city, where 181 nationalities live together. A city in which almost all languages of the world are spoken”<sup>20</sup> (Debrocq 2022). The name of the institution refers to “*passer la porte*” (entering the door; Debrocq 2022, italics added) as well as *passport*, and in this way refers to different kinds of literary border crossing. In Passa Porta, the literatures of both language communities meet in a resolutely international context through performances, literary festivals, debates, workshops, residences, and so on. Moreover, translation has an important role in their programming and operations. Passa Porta could therefore be said to operate at both an intra-national and an international level.

Because of the Belgian federal state structure, Passa Porta is a somewhat complex organisation. Since culture is a subnational competence, no new federal cultural organisations can be established. Therefore, Passa Porta in the beginning housed three different non-profit organisations (NPOs): the Dutch literary organisation Het Beschrijf (funded by Flanders Literature), the francophone Belgian literary organisation Entrez Lire (funded by Promotion of Literature), and a third NPO, called Passa Porta vzw, for specific projects such as author residences (falling under the Kunstendecreet, the Flemish arts decree). This structure has since been simplified into two NPOs: Passa Porta NL (formerly Het Beschrijf) and Passa Porta FR (formerly Entrez Lire). Although the two organisations collaborate closely, they receive funding from different governments. Therefore, in addition to a common mission as a literature house, they also have different missions from their respective language communities.

As an important partner for state agents in the international promotion of literature from both language communities, Passa Porta and its two associations hover between the levels of translation management and

translation practices we identified at the start of this chapter. In 2003, for example, the Flemish Literature Fund outsourced the programming of the Flemish guest of honourship at the Salon du livre in Paris to Het Beschrijf ([Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren 2003](#), 93). Passa Porta FR took over the organisation of translator residences at the Collège de traduction de Senefle in 2018, stimulating translations of francophone Belgian literature ([Lallemant 2019](#), 18). Finally, Passa Porta NL collaborated in 2019 with both Flanders Literature and the Foire du livre in Brussels for the intra-Belgian literary initiative Flirt Flamand ([Flirt Flamand n.d.](#)).

According to Piet Joostens, literary programme maker at Passa Porta, the Passa Porta translator collective developed out of former projects where there was a need for translation not just between Dutch and French, but to and from multiple languages. As of 2012, this effort of collaborative translation continued with a new configuration of translators, presenting themselves as the Passa Porta translator collective. The new group consisted of two translators into Dutch (Katelijne De Vuyst and Bart Vonck) and two into French (Danielle Losman and Pierre Geron). The focus also shifted to an intra-Belgian and bidirectional translation flow with French translations of Flemish poets such as Charles Ducal, as well as Dutch translations of francophone Belgian authors ([De Vuyst 2022](#), 121). Given this experience, it comes as no surprise that the organisers of the national poet initiative invited the collective to translate Ducal’s national poems (122). However, prior to agreeing to translate Ducal’s twelve national poems, the collective was also approached by Primaëlle Vertenoël, the director of the publishing house Tétrasyre (121). This would eventually lead to the integration of two members of the collective in the editorial board of *De Flandre* (see further), as well as two translations by the collective in this series, *Chambre sourde* (Anechoic chamber) by Erik Spinoy, and *Lavis à l’encre* by Charles Ducal.

In this way, a special type of translator emerged out of a multilingual international house of literature funded by both language communities: collaborative and institutional. The collaborative dimension is stressed in their joint publications by the fact that these were first signed with the name of the collective, the names of the respective translators only appearing on the following line after a colon ([Ducal 2016](#), 3). In addition to fitting into the broad definition of collaborative translations as a situation in which “two or more agents cooperate in some way to produce a translation” ([O’Brien 2011](#), 17), given the collaborative nature of publishing translations ([Huss 2018](#), 448), the translated anthology *Lavis à l’encre* also appears to be the result of a joint effort between translators, or a collaborative translation in the “narrow meaning” ([O’Brien 2011](#), 17). Mentioning both the collective and the individual names of the translators on the title page highlights the collaborative translational practice of

this collective. In doing so, it moves the focus from a finalised and often individualised end product to an “artefact of a decision to achieve finality out of the brooding, deliberation, dialogue and editing that otherwise would continue on as the translators and their collaborators fine-tuned their translation” (Huss 2018, 449). The emphasis on the collective act of translation is further highlighted by one of the translators’ assertions that she does not recall who made the first drafts, given the numerous alternations of the translations during in-person meetings between the translators (De Vuyst 2022, 123). Yet the notion of collaborative translation also raises familiar questions about the division of labour (Huss 2018, 448). This allows us to discern different phases in the creative collaboration between the four translators. The first stage consisted of jointly selecting the poems. The chosen poems were then divided among the translators, who individually created a first draft. Unique in this respect was that the two Flemish members of the collective translated the texts from their native language to a target language (De Vuyst 2022, 122). This translation was then discussed and often slightly altered based on feedback in plenary sessions in Passa Porta in which the author himself participated as well (123).

Through its name, the collective also clearly stated its institutional link to Passa Porta. As Kaisa Koskinen (2014, 480) points out “institutions have their reasons, obligations and motivations for engaging with translation, or choosing not to do so.” In the case of Passa Porta, translation clearly serves the institution’s cultural-diplomatic mission of border crossing and (inter)national dialogue. As Koskinen (2014) further points out, “to produce the image that the institution speaks to you directly in many tongues, the translator’s role needs to be effaced” and instead translation is seen as “a collective and anonymous process where the institution bears the authority.” This applies to the Passa Porta collective only in part. The individual labour of each translator is subsumed by the collective, but the translators are still mentioned by name (Ducal 2016, 3). Given their shared experience and their simultaneous function as Ducal’s translators for the national poet initiative, the translators can individually be understood as “consecrated consecrators”<sup>21</sup> (Casanova 2002, 17–18), or translators who obtained a high symbolic capital within their field and are therefore able to consecrate authors in the other language by means of translation. While they do not neatly fit into Casanova’s definition of institutional consecrators, obtaining symbolic capital from a link to a “scholarly or academic institution” (2002, 17–18), it can be argued that their institutional link to Passa Porta did legitimate the status of their translations. In 2019, when Passa Porta stopped structurally supporting the collective, shifting instead to collaboration on a project-by-project basis, the Passa Porta translator collective changed its name to the bilingual *Le Collectif bruxellois des*

traducteurs/Brussels vertalerscollectief (Brussels translator collective) thus severing the direct institutional link with this literary CSO.

### Tétras Lyre, De Flandre

The anthology *Lavis à l'encre* was published in January 2016 by Tétras Lyre, a small poetry press based in Liège, as part of its De Flandre series. Founded in 1988, this publisher, whose original editorial ethos could be described as artisanal, had recently undergone important restructuring. With the arrival of a new director, Maxime Coton, the publisher undertook a “professionalisation of its promotion and distribution”<sup>22</sup> and “certain adjustments to its editorial project”<sup>23</sup> (Habrand and Durand 2018, 426). These changes were continued when Primaëlle Vertenoël succeeded Coton in 2014. She wanted to reconnect with an old editorial practice of publishing translated poetry. While Tétras Lyre became known for publishing translations mainly from Spanish to French and to a lesser degree from French to Dutch through its bilingual collection, the new director instead opted to focus on French translations of contemporary Flemish poets (Hendrickx 2019). The decision for such a series as well as its title were, however, based on suggestions by Gérald Purnelle (Ducal 2016, 4), Vertenoël’s former professor at the University of Liège and a specialist in francophone Belgian poetry.

The selection of poets to be translated was made by the series’ editorial board. Besides Primaëlle Vertenoël and Gérald Purnelle, this board included two translators of the Passa Porta translator collective, Katelijne De Vuyst and Bart Vonck, as well as director of PoëzieCentrum and national poet initiative cofounder Carl De Strycker. Together, the board selected contemporary Flemish poets who—without exception—had not yet received a French translation in book format. To date, the series has published collections by seven contemporary Flemish authors, encompassing both emerging and experienced poets, in monolingual French editions. These publications are, in chronological order, Paul Bogaert (*Le slalom soft*, *The soft slalom*, 2015), Els Moors (*Chants d’un cheval qui chavire*, *Songs of a capsizing horse*, 2015), Charles Ducal (*Lavis à l’encre*, 2016), Maud Vanhauwaert (*Nous sommes parallèles, nous rejoins à l’infini*, *We are parallel, we meet again ad infinitum*, 2017), Erik Spinoy (*Chambre sourde*, *Anechoic chamber*, 2019), Roland Jooris (*Sculptures*, *Sculptures*, 2019) and Lies Van Gasse (*Révolution*, *Revolution*, 2019). The regularity of the series was initially assured by a publication rate of two translations per year, with the aim of alternating between established and new Flemish poets (De Vuyst 2017, 30). This rhythm, however, became increasingly irregular as time went by: 2016 and 2017 saw only one translation, and in 2018, no new works were published within the series. However, the guest of honourship

of Flanders at the Brussels French-speaking literary festival Foire du livre in 2019 prompted three new book publications of the poets Erik Spinoy, Roland Jooris, and Lies Van Gasse into French (Remacle 2019, 22; see below). Since the departure of Vertenoel as the director of Tétrás Lyre in March 2020, no new publications have appeared within the series.

One could argue that De Flandre as a series constitutes a kind of repertoire formation or culture planning, defined by Itamar Even-Zohar (2002, 46) as “a deliberate act of intervention, either by power holders or by ‘free agents’, into an extant or a crystallizing repertoire.” As a portal for the francophone reader to Flemish poetry, De Flandre fosters “knowledge of a collection of works/oeuvres that have a model function” (Andringa 2006, 526). The serial publication format of De Flandre strengthens this repertoire formation. Translation series and anthologies indeed aim at “preserving published authors, exhibiting them, relating the individual authors, and thus interpreting them” (Seruya et al. 2013, 1) as important contemporary Flemish poets. The cultural diplomacy performed by the series is further reinforced by its mission statement. Systematically included in the colophon since the first publication in June 2015, it refers to the “willingness in Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles to establish a bridge and a dialogue between two communities sharing the same federal state”<sup>24</sup> (Ducal 2016).

The series is further described as “a dynamic, regular and long-term instrument that allows francophone readers to get to know Flemish poetry better”<sup>25</sup> (Ducal 2016, 4). The focus of this series lies therefore on creating an intercultural dialogue between the Dutch and French language communities of Belgium by translating Flemish poets to French. According to Seruya et al. (2013, 1), anthologies and series have an educative function. This function is highlighted by the series’s title, De Flandre, which not only regroups all the translated poets but also “immediately indicates to the potential reader what type, if not what kind of work he is dealing with” (Genette 2002, 27). Due to the direct reference to the cultural space from which these works originate, De Flandre presents itself as a representative selection of contemporary Flemish poets. The educational aspect of the series is also emphasised by the pre- or postfaces that are—apart from the last volume, Lies Van Gasse’s *Révolution* (2019)—systematically included in the series. These not only briefly analyse the (translation of the) work but also provide an overview of the author’s oeuvre and contextualise it within the broader Dutch-speaking literary field. Furthermore, earlier publications in the same series are mentioned on the page before the preface, further strengthening the links between them.

The series occupies a special position within the catalogue of Tétrás Lyre that is enforced by its paratext. Whereas most of the other publications display letterpress covers or covers containing the title and a single image, often highlighting the artisanal methods used by the publisher (Habrand

and Durand 2018, 425), *De Flandre* instead showcases a modern cover design, alternating dark blue, grey, and purple geometrical figures on a white background. Designed by Mona Habibizadeh, the analogous covers visualise the theme of the duplicate within the translation process, as well as the formal play in poetry (Ducal 2016, 4). The similarity between the covers also creates a visual cohesion, which in turn strengthens the thematic connection between the individual translations and, consequently, the authors.

Finally, the series was promoted at literary events with a clear intra-Belgian cultural diplomacy dimension. It was launched at the thirty-third Parisian *Marché de la poésie*, where Belgium was guest of honour, with representatives of both language communities present. The Flemish delegation was organised by the Flemish Literature Fund and *PoëzieCentrum*. (Its then-director Carl De Strycker was involved with both the national poet initiative and *De Flandre*.) *PoëzieCentrum* had a stand where recent French translations of Flemish poets were sold, and there was a stage where lectures, book presentations, interviews, and debates were held. The Flemish Literature Fund and *PoëzieCentrum* hoped to “further strengthen the collaboration between poetry from Wallonia and Flanders and to systematically increase the number of translations into French”<sup>26</sup> (*Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren* 2015, 59). In addition to this, the guest of honourship of Flanders organised by the Flemish Literature Fund and *Passa Porta* at the francophone literary festival *Foire du livre* in 2019 acted as an impetus for *Tétras Lyre* to publish three new translations in the *De Flandre* series (Remacle 2019, 22).

From the perspective of the book market, however, the publication of a series of translated poetry like *De Flandre* is anything but evident. As Johan Heilbron (2020) shows, the centrality of a language in the world system of translations is inversely proportional to the number of translations into that language. It is therefore far more difficult to publish a translation from a semi-peripheral source language like Dutch to a central target language like French than vice versa. Moreover, as Gisèle Sapiro points out, poetry as a genre “was progressively marginalised in the world market for literary translation” (2019, 39) since the 1970s. This increasingly precarious situation meant that large literary publishers mainly published poets “who had been introduced beforehand by small publishers” (Sapiro 2019, 39) or whose writings in other genres (notably novels) had already proven successful (26).

Given the absence of earlier translations of the same poets in book format, financial aid by state agents was an economic necessity for this small-scale publisher of poetry working between a peripheral and a central language. As mentioned in the colophon, *Tétras Lyre* received financial aid from both the Flemish and francophone language communities. Through the Flemish Literature Fund, the publication received direct funding via a

translation grant. Concerning *Lavis à l'encre*, this consisted of reimbursing 100% of the actual translation costs. In addition, they funded up to 25% of the direct production costs, given that this was Ducal's first translation published at Tétrás Lyre ([Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren 2015](#), 43–44). Because of their focus on so-called ex-translations (in this case, translations from French to another language) due to budgetary limitations, Promotion of Literature did not provide a translation grant to the series (personal correspondence with Silvie Philippart de Foy, December 15, 2021). However, as indicated by the presence of the Promotion of Literature logo on the last page of *Lavis à l'encre*, the organisation was present in the publication process, albeit through indirect funding via a Contrat-Programme. This contract, established between the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and smaller publishers within the same region, ensures financial viability for these publishers and facilitates their representation at professional events. In exchange, poetry publishers such as Tétrás Lyre publish at least six books of poetry per year ([Hendrickx 2019](#)). Yet, whilst this policy allows for a multitude of small-scale publishers to focus mainly on “intellectual or aesthetic criteria” ([Sapiro 2010](#), 425) rather than on economic factors, it also directs them to publish poetry from their own region, in lieu of translations. Article 65, paragraph four of the Contrat-Programme indeed stipulates that these six publications should be part of “the artistic and cultural landscape of the French-speaking Community”<sup>27</sup> ([Service Général de la Création Artistique Arts de la Scène 2019](#)). While this policy allows small-scale publishers to exist in the first place by providing a basic income, it also gives the publisher less leeway for publishing works that fall out of scope, such as translations. The publication of the six books covered by the Contrat-Programme is already a time-intensive process, as there is typically a one-year period between acquiring a manuscript and releasing the final version, according to Vertenoël ([Remacle 2019](#), 20). Consisting of the only type of publication excluded from the Contrat-Programme ([Vertenoël 2022](#)), the series occupied an economically precarious position within the catalogue, existing as an additional endeavour reliant entirely on Vertenoël's unremunerated efforts. Consequently, the series was discontinued when Vertenoël left Tétrás Lyre in 2020 for personal reasons.

### **An intra-Belgian translation flow**

How do Charles Ducal and the three initiatives described above—the national poet initiative, the Passa Porta translator collective and De Flandre—figure in larger intra-Belgian poetry translation flows? To propose an answer, we used the corpus of the BELTRANS project<sup>28</sup> and extracted the bibliographic data on poetry. As pointed out by [Tyulenev \(2019, 105\)](#), “[t]he poetry that makes it into translation is a veritable *minimum minimorum*.”

This scarcity is also reflected within our corpus: between 1970 and 2020, there were only 245 intra-Belgian poetry book translations, whereas more than fifty originally Dutch poetry books are published on a yearly basis in Flanders alone (De Geest 2023, 46). Approximately two thirds of these 245 translations are from Dutch to French (161) and only one third (80) from French to Dutch. The total number also includes four bilingual publications with both Dutch and French as source languages. In the context of intra-Belgian poetry translation, the inverse relation between centrality of language and the number of in-translations signalled by Heilbron (2020) does not hold, given that there are twice as many translations from the semi-peripheral language Dutch to the central language French as vice versa. We hypothesise that this unequal translation flow is the result of two factors: a difference in translation management (that is, grants) in both language communities and a difference in language proficiency. The francophone literary service Promotion of Literature offers fewer translation grants than the Flemish Literary Fund/Flanders Literature (European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture 2022, 147–48) due to budgetary limitations (personal correspondence with Silvie Philippart de Foy, December 15, 2021). Furthermore, the proportion and number of bilingual Flemings used to be higher than among francophone Belgians. This difference is partially historically determined, with Flemish elites actively taking part in French culture (Beheydt 1995, 54). Certainly, for earlier periods, this meant that francophone Belgian poetry could reach Flemish readers in the original language.

Looking at the evolution of poetry translations over time, we see an important increase starting from 2014, the first year of the national poet initiative, and a peak in 2019, when Tétrás Lyre published three poetry books for the Flemish guest of honourship at the Foire du livre. In a period of seven years, the number of translated poetry books systematically increased. While this increase is slow at first, a total of sixty-one translations were published in this period, forty-five of which were from Dutch to French, thirteen from French to Dutch and three were bilingual poetry anthologies. In contrast, in the seven years before (the period 2007–2013), only eleven poetry books were translated from Dutch to French, nine from French to Dutch, and no bilingual publications. While both translation directions increase, the increase in translations from Dutch to French is exponential, with four times as many. We should note, however, that nineteen of those forty-five translations from Dutch to French are poems from Paul van Ostaijen’s *De Feesten van angst en pijn* (Feasts of Fear and Agony) translated by Jan H. Mysjkin, which were published separately between 2017 and 2019 by the Musée européen du livre d’artiste instead of as one poetry book. If we merge these separate poems, the figures have more than doubled to twenty-six poetry books. There has not been a similar boom

since the 1970s, when the Collection bilingue series by the Brussels-based publisher La Renaissance du Livre and systematic translation initiatives by the Brussels-based publisher-translator Henry Fagne resulted in a surge of Flemish poetry translations.

It is not clear whether the decline in 2020 signals the end of the momentum or should be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, as we do not have enough temporal distance yet. However, between 2020 and 2024, no new poetry books have appeared in either the De Flandre series, and no other publisher has started a similar project. The translations of the national poet initiative therefore remain the only systematic intra-Belgian translation initiatives in book format within the poetry genre.

In the period 2014–2020, Charles Ducal is the most translated Flemish poet after Paul van Ostaijen. If we merge Mysjkin's separately published Van Ostaijen translations, Ducal claims the top spot. Besides *Lavis à l'encre*, three other book translations of Ducal's work appeared during this period, two of which were published after his time as a national poet. His national poems were published by PoëzieCentrum and Atlas Contact in the trilingual collection *Bewoond door iets groters/Au-delà de la frontière/Von etwas Größerem bewohnt* (Inhabited by something bigger, 2015). Maelström, the publishing house of David Giannoni, the francophone partner of the national poet initiative, published two poetry books in its Bookleg series, translated by Jean-Marie Gérard and Ducal himself: *Onleesbaar/Illisible* (Illegible; 2016) and *Omlaag/En bas* (Down; 2018). Numerically, De Flandre is the second most important series of translated Flemish poetry after the above-mentioned Collection bilingue, in which the Brussels-based La Renaissance du Livre published eleven poetry books between 1972 and 1982. In the period 2014–2020, De Flandre accounts for around 16% (seven out of forty-five) of poetry translations from Dutch to French, and about 27% if one merges the Van Ostaijen translations (seven out of twenty-six).

All national poets up to and including 2020—Charles Ducal (2014–2016), Laurence Vielle (2016–2018), Els Moors (2018–2020), and Carl Norac (2020–2022)—were translated at least once during the period 2014–2020. As previously mentioned, Ducal's works were translated four times. Similarly, Els Moors was translated three times: once in the De Flandre series, once in maelström's Bookleg series, and once in a co-publication of her national poems by maelström and PoëzieCentrum. In the reverse direction, from French to Dutch, maelström and PoëzieCentrum were also responsible for three translations of Laurence Vielle and one of Carl Norac. As a result, 18% of all intra-Belgian translations (eleven out of sixty-one) during the period 2014–2020 were of national poets. Additionally, actors involved in the national poet initiative (PoëzieCentrum, maelström reEvolution, L'arbre à paroles, and Midis de la poésie) accounted for nearly

23% of intra-Belgian translations during this timeframe (fourteen out of sixty-one). If Mysjkin’s separate translations of Van Ostaijen’s poems are excluded, these percentages rise to 26% (eleven out of forty-two) and 33% (fourteen out of forty-two), respectively. Similarly, translations produced by members of the Passa Porta translator collective (Katelijne De Vuyst, Bart Vonck, Pierre Geron, Danielle Losman) represent 18% (eleven out of sixty-one) and 26% (eleven out of forty-two), respectively. In other words, actors connected to the translation of Charles Ducal into French, particularly those involved in *Lavis à l’encre*, played a significant role in intra-Belgian poetry translation flows overall, during what can be characterised as a boom period.

### Conclusion

As we have seen, the publication of the poetry anthology *Lavis à l’encre* is the result of a changing and complex interaction between a multitude of different and sometimes divergent policies, working both in concert and in dissonance with each other as part of a broader context of intra-Belgian poetry translation flows. Based on [Meylaerts’s \(2017, 46\)](#) tripartite approach to translation policy, we outlined in this chapter the interaction between (1) top-down policies (translation management) initiated on a regional and national level—on the one hand, translation grants by the Flemish Literature Fund and Contrat-Programme by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, and on the other hand by the Prince Philip Fund and the cultural agreement—including policy tools used by state agents to promote Flemish or francophone Belgian literature in the transnational literary field ([McMartin 2019, 95](#)) but also cultural policies stimulating intra-Belgian dialogue; (2) bottom-up (translation) practices of the target publisher (Tétras Lyre), the translators, and literary CSOs on both sides of the language border (e.g., Vonk & Zonen, PoëzieCentrum, Maison de la poésie d’Amay, Passa Porta); and (3) the translation beliefs expressed by the mission statements of actors on both levels (the national poet initiative, the Prince Philip Fund, the Flemish Literary Fund, Passa Porta, De Flandre) and the debate about the so-called national character of the national poet initiative.

Furthermore, when dealing with translation management, practices, and beliefs we should consider a social reality that is unpredictable and unstable and acknowledge arbitrariness and coincidence ([Meylaerts 2017](#)). In this case, for example, the coincidental departure of one actor ([Verte-noeil](#)) led to the discontinuation of a whole series of translations. It is within this constantly changing context that the actors involved in the first editions of the national poet initiative, and De Flandre/*Lavis à l’encre* in particular, strove to establish a repertoire of Flemish poets in francophone Belgium (and, for the national poet initiative, also vice versa). This

repertoire formation is consolidated numerically as these three initiatives together take up a significant proportion of a sharp rise in intra-Belgian poetry translation flows over the period 2014–2020. These translations in turn aimed at stimulating a literary or even broader cultural dialogue in a now largely federalised Belgian state.

## Notes

- 1 We opted to translate *Dichter des Vaderlands* and its francophone equivalent *Poète National* as “national poet.” The concept of a “poet laureate” is specific to the anglophone world and is not entirely equivalent to that of a national poet in the Low Countries. The poet laureate is, as Ducal explains, state-appointed, whereas the Belgian initiative came from civil society organisations (Charrier 2014). While poet laureates have been defined in recent times as “domestic ambassadors of the seemingly apolitical cause of poetry” (Paeth 2023, 1), the Belgian national poet initiative has a more visible political dimension (Vandebriel 2022). Furthermore, the notion of *national* in “national initiative” refers to the aim of the organisations to create an intra-national (literary) dialogue in a highly federalised country, rather than promoting a homogenous Belgian nation as such (see *Poète National(er) Dichter des Vaderlands*, n.d.-b).
- 2 Original text in Dutch: “De literaire taalgrenskloof wordt maar niet smaller.” All gloss translations were made by the authors.
- 3 We do not consider Belgium’s German-speaking community in this chapter, whose relationship to the federalisation process differs markedly from the other two language communities in historical, political, and demographic terms (see Beck and Penné 2019; Falter 2025, 397–406).
- 4 Original text in Dutch: “Het Prins Filipfonds speelt een sleutelrol bij de [ondersteuning van] projecten en de ontwikkeling van originele initiatieven die de voorkeur geven aan de ontmoeting en de uitwisseling tussen de verschillende gemeenschappen van het land.”
- 5 The Flemish Literature Fund is an autonomous public institution that does its work “at arm’s length” of the Flemish government. Its name was changed to Flanders Literature in 2019. Promotion of Literature, on the other hand, is a literary service that is part of the ministry of culture of Wallonia-Brussels Federation (Folie et al. 2024).
- 6 Original text in Dutch: “Wederzijdse kennis bevorderen van elkaars cultuur en taal.”
- 7 Original text in Dutch: “Samenwerking . . . tussen structuren, organisaties en culturele actoren uit de beide gemeenschappen.”
- 8 As of July 2024, only poets from Belgium’s Dutch- and French-speaking language communities have been appointed. There has not yet been a German-speaking laureate.
- 9 Original text in French: “Charles Ducal a été officiellement intronisé *poète national* pour un an, un titre qui n’a évidemment rien d’officiel puisqu’il émane du Poëzicentrum de Gand et de la Maison de la poésie de Namur.”
- 10 Original text in French: “Dérisoire et anecdotique.”
- 11 Original text in French: “Grand et passionnant.”
- 12 Original text in Dutch: “‘Dichter des Vaderlands’: klinkt het niet behoorlijk hoogdravend?”

- 13 Original text in French: “Peintres prolétaires révolutionnaires.”
- 14 Original text in Dutch: “Hegemonische Belgische verhaal.”
- 15 Original text in Dutch: “Bevolkingsgroep die meer autonomie bepleit.”
- 16 Original text in English.
- 17 Original text in Dutch: “Institutionele farce.”
- 18 Original text in Dutch: “Charles Ducal is een illustere onbekende in francofoon België. Het kostte mij en de organisatoren bijna een jaar voor we de consequenties daarvan inzagen. Uitnodigingen kwamen uit de druppelteller. Waar we met ons project een brug wilden bouwen, stootten we op een muur.”
- 19 Original text in Dutch: “Het bleek een vruchtbaar huwelijk. De contacten vermeerderden, nieuwe literaire organisaties uit Brussel en Wallonië sloten zich bij het project aan en het gedruppel werd alvast een straatje.”
- 20 Original text in French: “Nous sommes une Maison des littératures à Bruxelles et nous avons la profonde conviction que *Passa Porta* n’aurait pas la même existence ailleurs », déclare Adrienne Nizet, directrice adjointe. « Nous voulons être à l’image de notre ville, où cohabitent 181 nationalités.”
- 21 Original text in French: “Consacrants consacrés.”
- 22 Original text in French: “Une professionnalisation de sa promotion et de sa diffusion.”
- 23 Original text in French: “Certains ajustements de son projet editorial.”
- 24 Original text in French: “Une volonté de lancer, en Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, un pont de passage et de dialogue entre deux communautés associées dans un même état fédéral.”
- 25 Original text in French: “Un instrument dynamique qui, avec régularité et sur le long terme, permette aux lecteurs francophones de mieux connaître la poésie flamande.”
- 26 Original text in Dutch: “De groeiende samenwerking tussen poëzie uit Wallonië en poëzie uit Vlaanderen verder te versterken en het aantal vertalingen in het Frans systematisch te doen toenemen.”
- 27 Original text in French: “Le paysage artistique et culturel de la Communauté française.”
- 28 BELTRANS is a collaborative project undertaken by the francophone Belgian university UCLouvain, the Flemish university KU Leuven, and the Royal Library of Belgium, focusing on intra-Belgian translation flows between 1970 and 2020. The research conducted by the authors of this article is part of the BELTRANS project. As part of the initiative, the Royal Library has compiled a database cataloguing all book translations from Dutch to French, or vice versa, by authors or illustrators with Belgian nationality. At the time of writing, the database remains incomplete, meaning the numbers presented here may still fluctuate; however, no significant changes to the overall proportions are anticipated.

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## 8 Why the French Market Melted for Lize Spit’s *Het smelt*

### The Success Story of a Flemish Bestseller in French

*Kim Andringa and Maud Gonne*

In their introduction to a special issue of *Meta* titled “Connecting translation and networks,” Deborah Folaron and [Hélène Buzelin \(2007, 637\)](#) highlighted the relevance of studying the position of translation and translators in small-scale production networks, as “an inductive and incremental approach enabling us to study actors and interactions without making too many presuppositions about their nature.” This is the angle we would like to take in this chapter describing the network surrounding *Débâcle* ([2018](#), trans. Emmanuelle Tardif), the French translation of Lize Spit’s Flemish bestseller *Het smelt* ([2016](#); *The melting*). The analysis spans selection, translation, promotion, and early reception. Taking a descriptive approach partly based on fieldwork—namely, four semi-structured interviews conducted in the autumn of 2021<sup>1</sup>—this chapter will provide an overview of the genesis of a bestseller translation in today’s French-speaking publishing world, assess the role played by specific mediating agents and institutions, and identify key factors of a literary translation success story (see [Smeyers 2019](#)). Indeed, although it has now sold more than 200,000 copies in Dutch, it was not a given that *Het smelt*, a story firmly rooted in the Flemish countryside, would be so well received in France and French-speaking Belgium. However, with over 35,000 copies sold, Emmanuelle Tardif’s translation has quickly become a successful title in the *Lettres néerlandaises* series of Arles-based publisher Actes Sud.

#### A few words on translation networks and mediators

[Hélène Buzelin \(2005, 2007\)](#) and others ([Abdallah 2014](#); [Gonne 2018](#); [Tahir-Gürçağlar 2007](#)) have highlighted the importance of a network-based perspective in understanding the success or failure of translation projects. They point out Bruno Latour’s actor–network theory (ANT) as a tool that can account not only for the diverse agents involved in translation projects (authors, translators, editors, correctors, etc.), but also

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for a heterogeneous set of other entities (versions, drafts, book market, remuneration, contracts, fundings, etc.) that exert their influence across the entire process of (literary) translation. Proceeding from a contextual flattening-out—that is, starting out of chaos, without assuming any pre-existing hierarchical relationships—this approach suggests following the agents' activities and generating a description of translation “in the making,” in which “the context emerge[s] as the translation project unfolds along with the process” (Buzelin 2007, 166). Production networks are “not fixed or definite, but are constantly moving, growing and adjusting to their needs. As such they are difficult to pin down. However, they can be analysed from within, by way of an ethnographic approach” (Folaron and Buzelin 2007, 635). According to Latour (2005, 8), “the social is visible only by the traces it leaves (under trials) when a new association is being produced between elements.” Diverging from the conventional understanding of translation as a linguistic or cultural transfer between languages, Latour uses the term *translation* to describe the processes through which associations are formed and actors—both human and non-human—are transformed through their interactions. The objective of research, from this perspective, is to reassemble these “translations,” that is, the networks of connections that give rise to what we call “the social” (Latour 2005, 8). As a research method, ANT allows us to observe our object from a different perspective. The contribution of each agent in a common translation project “is rarely publicly acknowledged, and as the names of the coordinators are unlikely to appear on the final product, this coordinating role becomes invisible (hence ignored) once the process is analysed retrospectively” (Buzelin 2005, 213). As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) state, the project is the incentive, the occasion, and the reason for the connection, which may or may not stabilise in time:

It [the project] temporarily assembles a very disparate group of people and presents itself as a *highly activated section of network* for a period of time that is relatively short but allows for the construction of more enduring links that will be put on hold while remaining available. (104–5)

In ANT, mediators play a key role as they are the agents that transform, multiply, and distort what they are supposed to carry (Latour 2005, 39). They are the assembly nodes that create sense, fostering sociocultural emergence. Applied to the literary field, cultural mediators are defined by Meylaerts et al. (2017, 67) as polyvalent “cultural actors active across linguistic, cultural and geographical borders, occupying strategic positions within large networks and acting as a carrier of cultural transfer,” that is, processes of circulation, transformation, and reinterpretation of

cultural objects across any kind of boundaries. According to Joep [Leerssen \(2014, 1401\)](#), mediators are the real organisers of literary life, and while they have long been in the shadow of literary and cultural history, “their retrieval from obscurity [...] is part of a new approach and a deep realignment, oriented towards [...] the dynamics of memory and recycling rather than the evenemential Birth of the New.” By mobilising these two key concepts, translation networks and mediators, while applying an inductive approach, we hope to provide an accurate description of the project, or a “highly activated section of a translation network,” as [Boltanski and Chiapello \(2005\)](#) describe it, and thus to offer a better understanding of the contemporary francophone literary translation market and its key agents.

### **From production to translation**

In this section, we will give an overview of the success story of the French translation of *Het smelt* up to the end of 2021. The micro-network around this translation project involves a series of visible and less visible agents and institutions that contributed in different ways, at different scales, and, unpredictably, to the fulfilment of the project: Lize Spit (the author), Das Mag (the Dutch publishing house), Emmanuelle Tardif (the translator), Philippe Noble (the director of the *Lettres néerlandaises* series for Actes Sud), Manuel Tricoteaux (the director of foreign series for Actes Sud), and Margot Dijkgraaf (writer and literary critic), but also the Dutch Foundation for Literature (Nederlands Letterenfonds) and Flanders Literature (Literatuur Vlaanderen), the main funding providers for literary translations and promoters of Dutch-language literature. Non-human agents include royalties, translation rights, e-mail exchanges, draft versions, and so on. A bias must be announced from the outset. Most of the data collected comes from interviews with and documents provided by the network’s main agents. This is obviously a risk inherent in our type of research, which focuses on agents and institutions operating in real time and whose data cannot be collected, shared, and analysed without some form of mutual trust. It is quite possible that certain difficulties, conflicts, pressures, and other relational and institutional factors have slipped under our radar. Nonetheless, the absence of contradiction when cross-referencing the interviews with other sources (principally e-mails exchanged during the translation process) gives us confidence that our account is both consistent and well founded. While we acknowledge that our narrative is shaped by our positionality and methodological choices—and is therefore not neutral in the strictest sense—we believe it approaches a form of situated objectivity grounded in empirical coherence and triangulation of data.

### *Production process*

The author Lize Spit was born in 1988 and grew up in the Belgian Kempen region. She studied in Brussels at the Royal Institute for Theatre, Cinema and Sound, where she obtained a master's degree in screenwriting. In 2013, she won both the jury and audience award of the Write Now! competition for young writers (15- to 24-year-olds). Only three years later, in January 2016, her first novel, *Het smelt*, was published. The story of *Het smelt* is told from the perspective of Eva, a 26-year-old woman who returns to her Flemish home village for the first time in a very long time to attend a posthumous birthday celebration for a childhood friend and the inauguration of a new milking parlour at a dairy farm. Eva carries a huge block of ice in her trunk. "What happens when it melts? And what is it precisely that doesn't melt?" (Dessing 2021) are the questions that keep readers on the edge of their seats for around five hundred pages.

According to Philippe Noble, the director of the Lettres néerlandaises series of Actes Sud, *Het smelt* was brought to the market with "major resources" by Amsterdam-based publishing house Das Mag, a relatively new entrant in the Dutch literary field which "had clearly decided to make a big splash." From one day to the next, Lize Spit was all over the Flemish and Dutch press. *Het smelt* immediately became the best-selling book of the year in Flanders as well as the winner of the book competition of the Dutch *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper, and it won the Bronzen Uil award for the best literary debut in Dutch. In a short time span, the book made it to the shortlist of the Libris Prize in literature and the Premio Strega Europeo. For Noble, the publisher Das Mag has been an important mediator in this success story. Das Mag emerged thanks to a crowdfunding campaign launched in the autumn of 2015 and, with an anti-conventional self-branding strategy (Smeets 2021, 336), claims to have a different approach from the rest of the publishing business: fewer books published per year, higher royalties (15% instead of 10%), more individual coaching for the authors, and intensive social media promotion.

Whereas other publishers came up with around two hundred titles a year, they would not publish more than ten a year. The time and energy that remained, and especially the money saved as a result, could be spent on editing and promotion around the launched book.<sup>2</sup> (Jager 2016)

Although "competitors were sceptical about the approach"<sup>3</sup> (Jager 2016), 132,351 copies of *Het smelt* were sold in 2016, plus another 3,086 of the deluxe edition. The last debut to achieve such sales numbers in the Dutch-language market was *Bonita Avenue* by Peter Buwalda in 2010 (150,000 copies sold in the first year, more than 350,000 since). *Het smelt*

has now sold over 200,000 copies in Dutch and has been translated into twelve languages.

The fact that Das Mag was new on the market and directed by young editors—Toine Donk and Daniël van der Meer—with a clear vision of the contemporary literary market and its logics seems indeed to be the first important factor for our success story. The year after, young author Saskia de Coster would describe Das Mag as follows:

Das Mag symbolises eternal youth in the literary landscape. They act as an anti-rust agent in the literary world, which is a bit rusty anyway. They break through the somewhat closed aura that often surrounds literature and, with their reading clubs and festivals, appeal to a younger audience that other publishers do not always reach.<sup>4</sup> (Vanden Bosch 2017)

### *Selection process*

In April 2016, translation rights for *Het smelt* had already been sold to publishers in the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, France, Norway, Denmark, and France. Das Mag, not having any expertise in international translation rights, entrusted this mission to Cossee International Agency, part of Cossee Publishers, an Amsterdam-based independent publishing house established in 2001. From our fieldwork, it appears that the first selector, and thus mediator, of *Het smelt* and Lize Spit for Actes Sud was Philippe Noble. Philippe Noble was born in the south of France in 1949 and studied languages and literature (French, Latin, Greek) “following a very traditional—and very French—route”<sup>5</sup> in Bordeaux and then Paris. His interest in Dutch began through a personal relationship with a Dutch woman; he studied Dutch at the Sorbonne while teaching French and Latin in a suburban Parisian secondary school, and finally defended a PhD thesis in Dutch literature on the modernist writer Edgar du Perron in 1980. After having taught Dutch at the Sorbonne from 1979 to 1992, he was recruited by the Foreign Affairs Department to occupy positions of cultural diplomacy such as director of French institutes abroad and cultural advisor in Amsterdam, Ghent, The Hague, and Vienna, among other places. He finished his professional career as the custodian of what he calls “a small network for academic cooperation between France and the Netherlands.”<sup>6</sup> Throughout all this, he was translating, mainly from Dutch (approximately sixty titles), sometimes (rarely) from English or German, for well-known publishing houses like Gallimard, Seuil, or Calmann-Lévy, and, from 1987 onwards, Actes Sud. In 1987, at the request of Hubert Nysen, founder of Actes Sud, he set up, and then directed, the “modest”<sup>7</sup> series *Lettres néerlandaises*.

Noble told us that he was indeed the one who selected every book published in his series; however, this did not mean that every book he proposed was automatically accepted by the editor in charge of the foreign literature department. His selection was based on his browsing of the Dutch-speaking press, on suggestions from translators, friends, or editors, and on promotional folders. However, as he said, "I've never recommended a book that I hadn't read myself."<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the reception in the Dutch-speaking press or the sales figures in the Netherlands and Belgium—which were very promising in the case of Lize Spit's debut—were never decisive factors because he felt that "they are absolutely not transferable to other countries."<sup>9</sup> Two factors convinced him to propose *Het smelt* for translation: his favourable reading impressions ("despite the slow pace of the story, the book captivated me, by the rigor of its construction, by its psychological subtlety, its hyperrealism and the darkness of its vision"<sup>10</sup>) and the author's personality.

Normally, this kind of hype irritates me and does not encourage me to read the book thus brought to the fore. But the interview portraits of the author, published by *De Standaard*, among others, made me change my mind: the intelligence of Lize Spit's answers, the warmth and simplicity emanating from her personality seduced me.<sup>11</sup>

Manuel Tricoteaux, director of foreign series and the mystery series *Actes noirs*, was impressed by Noble's enthusiasm and agreed to purchase the French translation rights. Noble was not directly involved in the rights transaction. When we asked him about the average amount paid by Actes Sud for titles in his series and about the translation rights for Lize Spit's book in particular, he answered that he did not know. But from what he gathers, the translation rights for a novel by an unknown Flemish or Dutch debutant, except in the case of Lize Spit, are usually negotiated for between 3,000 and 5,000 euros. He thus assumes that Spit's rights were sold at a (much) higher price. At the other end of the spectrum, Actes Sud paid 100,000 euros in 2019 to acquire the rights to *Otmars zonen* and the next two volumes of Peter Buwalda's (still unfinished) trilogy, making it probably the most expensive Dutch title acquired by the publisher. According to Noble, the buzz around that book might have had to do with the rights auction that resulted in a bidding war between various French publishers.

Initially, the idea was to publish the translation of *Het smelt* in the *Actes noirs* series, the thriller series of Actes Sud since 2006. As a mediator, Philippe Noble was determined to represent Lize Spit's interests, but, at the same time, he was trying to find the best niche to ensure strong sales figures. The thriller series is better known and has larger print runs due to the success of the Scandinavian thrillers in the series, which could perhaps have enabled the novel to be pushed further. However, after having asked

Lize Spit how she felt about this choice, it was decided to place the French translation in Noble's *Lettres néerlandaises* series, which was perceived as a better fit given the book's content, which was judged to be more psychological-literary than thriller.

It is true that I had initially thought that the book would be best published in the *Actes noirs* series, not because I didn't want to include it in my own series, but because that would give it a chance of higher circulation. It is now back with my own series, which I am delighted about.<sup>12</sup> (Philippe Noble, e-mail to Lize Spit, May 8, 2017)

This reassured Lize Spit, who answered,

I hope I was not rude to ask so much about it in our conversation, about the series in which the book will be published. I think a good translation and appearing under the right wings are more important than circulation, of course. It is not healthy for a book if it is "disguised" as a thriller or crime book, when in a strict sense it is not one. I am honoured that *Het smelt* will appear in your series, and of course it is nice to read that you will oversee it.<sup>13</sup> (Lize Spit, e-mail to Philippe Noble, May 11, 2017)

With these details out of the way, Philippe Noble could go ahead with the production process of the French translation. He had selected a translator beforehand: Emmanuelle Tardif, who was already working on the translation of Spit's novel. Tardif was relatively new in the field. She had studied modern languages and journalism in Lille and had worked for a weekly magazine focused on regional issues in northern France, Belgium, and southeastern England. She moved to Utrecht, the Netherlands, in 1997 to be with a Dutch man she had met in Lille. In Utrecht, she studied at the Foundation ITV School of Interpreters and Translators and became an independent technical and business translator, translating texts in the arts as well. Her trajectory as a literary translator brought her into contact with the main (institutionalised) Dutch translation networks, such as the summer schools organised by the Centre of Expertise for Literary Translation (Expertisecentrum Literair Vertalen), where she met Philippe Noble. She also did various stays at the translators' houses in Amsterdam and Antwerp, which are run by the Dutch Foundation for Literature and Flanders Literature, respectively, and became accredited in fiction and non-fiction by those institutions. Her first literary translation was *Quatuor* by Anna Enquist, which was published by Actes Sud in 2016. *Débâcle* is her third literary translation. From the beginning of her career, Tardif also displayed a mediator profile between the Netherlands and France, two countries that "do not know each other, except in terms of clichés."<sup>14</sup>

*Translation process*

Philippe Noble's consideration for Tardif's work indicated a strong dedication, as he invested both time and effort in a kind of informal mentoring for the sake of the mediation of Dutch-language literature.

I had noticed her talent. She had just translated Anna Enquist's *Kwartet* (Quartet) for my series and I had been very satisfied with her work. However, she had never translated such a long (or difficult) novel, and I agreed, both to reassure her and to prevent any possible reticence on the part of the publisher, to reread her work chapter by chapter, as she progressed.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, Tardif competed with another translator—who had spontaneously applied—for the job. To decide between them, Noble asked them to translate an excerpt from the book. In the end, Noble chose Tardif and a contract was established by Manuel Tricoteaux, applying a so-called floor rate of 21 euros per 1,500 characters, based on a computer count, for the translator, and advances on royalties. Since Tardif was on the list of accredited translators maintained by the two literature foundations, she and the publisher could benefit from a translation grant, which covers two-thirds and three-fourths of the translation cost of the first and second books, respectively, of a given writer. As a precondition to obtain this grant, the translator's income cannot be under the minimum rate set by the literature foundations.

Emmanuelle Tardif did not receive any guidelines prior to her translation job either regarding the target public (French or Belgian), the translation of realia, and, in general, the choice between more foreignising or domesticating strategies regarding the translation of typically Flemish elements. For Noble, the use of Belgian French to refer to Flemish Belgian realia seemed “unnecessary, even harmful.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the original text was itself *Dutchified* to suit the conventions of literary language in the Netherlands. It had been revised by *Das Mag* in this sense, much to the regret of Spit and some of her fans, who had hoped to retain more of the book's Flemish Dutch usage. Noble reasoned that most of the readers would be located in France, secondly in French-speaking Belgium, then in French-speaking Switzerland, and very marginally in Quebec. In his eyes,

[y]ou can't serve one audience at the expense of the others. Emmanuelle is French and lives in Holland, but she grew up and studied in Lille and knows Belgium well. I helped her with some typically Flemish cultural aspects, and Lize Spit did the same. But Emmanuelle is a trained journalist and knows very well where to look for what she doesn't know. I know that there has been some controversy in

French-speaking Belgium about this aspect of the translation, but I find it unfounded. Emmanuelle has introduced several specific terms very well, just enough in my opinion to revive the *couleur locale*, and it is not by multiplying the *Belgicisms* that one makes a translation more accurate or more interesting.<sup>17</sup>

As she told us, Emmanuelle Tardif would naturally have tended to *Belgicise* the language of *Debâcle*. For her, it was clear that a Belgian reality should be translated in a Belgian language and after having lived in the North of France, typical Belgian expressions were not strange to her. However, she was convinced by Noble's argument and translated accordingly. She nevertheless insisted on maintaining some realia (e.g., *bourgmestre*, *maison communale* in lieu of *maire*, *mairie*).

Philippe Noble thus also played the role of editor (as first reviewer of the translation) and mentor of an emerging literary translator. He discussed almost every aspect of the translation with Tardif: nuances of meaning (interpretation of difficult passages), language register, narratological problems (focusing the story through pronouns, choice of past tenses, the voice of the narrator), syntactic difficulties, cultural notions (realia), etc. The author, Lize Spit, was also involved in the exchanges, notably, concerning little incoherencies in the source text, for instance, temporal incongruities, that Spit systematically let Tardif correct. Tardif and Spit met twice during the translation process. Additionally, Spit and Tardif maintained an e-mail correspondence for the duration of the translation process, even sending each other pictures when language was not able to render some part of Spit's cinematographic style.

Other agents, about whom we know very little, were involved at the end of the translation process: the professional proofreader, who mainly checked the coherence of the typographic presentation, and the second reviser, Eva Chanet, who proofreads in French. During the period under study, editorial responsibilities transitioned from Chanet to Charlotte Woillez, a literary translator from English (notably, of Nigerian author Sefi Atta) who was also involved in Actes Sud's Sindbad collection, which publishes novelists, poets, and thinkers from Arab countries. In case of disagreement with the translator, Philippe Noble was the one to decide, "but (almost) always in harmony."<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, Noble, Tardif, and Spit discussed the French title of the book together by e-mail.

Noble: [Manuel Tricoteaux] is a bit unhappy with the French title *Ça fond*, which he feels doesn't really "mouth," as theatre people say. I agree with him, but still Emmanuelle and I have always defended this title (possibly with an exclamation mark in French: *Ça fond!*),

because—as a literal translation—it also works best in relation to the content of the narrative.<sup>19</sup> (Philippe Noble, e-mail to Lize Spit and Emmanuelle Tardif, August 31, 2017)

Tardif: This is indeed a tricky issue. When I talked about the book with relatives in France last week, they did not immediately understand the title. I then had to explain: “Ça fond, du verbe fondre.” Adding something to these two words, as in the German version [*Und es Schmilzt*], seems like a good idea, as long as the emphasis on the melting itself, the process, is not lost. *Et ça fond* is better then, but perhaps does not “mouth” well enough yet. Could *Et puis ça fond* be a solution? Or, only slightly longer: *En attendant que ça fonde/Pendant que ça fond*? With a different angle, one could also choose *Ça va fondre*, which emphasises Eva’s plans for her very last day of life.<sup>20</sup> (Emmanuelle Tardif, e-mail to Philippe Noble and Lize Spit, September 2, 2017)

Spit: That brainstorming is a good thing. [...] Yes, I think *Ça fond* is not always very clear. I’ve had it too, that it didn’t really “sit well” in a conversation. *Et puis ça fond/Pendant que ça fond* I think can be considered, *Ça va fondre* is also an option, if that does not give away too much (my own French is not good enough to really sense what works in terms of content and layering and what does not). What are your thoughts on *Le dégel*? Or is that much more of a weather phenomenon?<sup>21</sup> (Lize Spit, e-mail to Philippe Noble and Emmanuelle Tardif, September 3, 2017)

However, the final title, *Débâcle*, was chosen by Manuel Tricoteaux, who defended the interests of the commercial department. The double sense of *débâcle*, as both a rout (figurative) and a sudden breakup of ice on a river, which may cause flooding and ice jams (literal), ended up convincing Philippe Noble, even though he preferred the original title.

The cover image was a choice of Actes Sud’s in-house graphic designer, but Lize was enthusiastic: by coincidence, this reworked photo is the work of a young Belgian artist (Frieke Janssens) she was acquainted with. The back cover blurb is the collective work of Noble, Tricoteaux, and the editor: “That’s a lot of people for a few lines, and sometimes the mountain gives birth to a mouse, but that’s the way it always is.”<sup>22</sup>

### From promotion to reception

*Débâcle* was released in February 2018 in large-format paperback, often used for first releases of translated literary fiction, particularly by prestige publishers. It went through three printings before being released in 2020 as a paperback. The large format sold nearly 16,000 copies in 2018.<sup>23</sup> In 2019, 831 copies were sold, and in 2020 and 2021, 13 and

109, respectively. The sharp drop in 2020 is explained by the release of the pocket paperback in February, which sold close to 17,000 copies in 2020 and 1,548 in 2021. According to Noble, these are very good numbers for a Dutch novel in French translation. To give an idea of the editor's expectations, the first print run for a translated novel published by Actes Sud is often 2,000 copies; for *Débâcle*, Noble speaks of 10,000 copies. In August 2017, Noble indeed wrote to Spit that Manuel Tricoteaux would give the novel all the attention it deserved in terms of print run and promotion:

In the meantime, Emmanuelle's translation has been at Actes Sud for some time and people there have now been able to read the text—and what do you think? Manuel Tricoteaux, editor-in-chief of foreign literature, is wildly enthusiastic *and wants the novel to get the attention it deserves* [our emphasis]. [...]

- Manuel is thinking of an initial print run of 10,000 copies—in ordinary human terms, this means it will be printed immediately in a print run of 10,000, which is a lot for a first translation; it ensures great visibility in bookshops, which is always a crucial point.
- One way or another, you will have to take a few days off in February to come to Paris, and perhaps there will also be opportunities to participate in literary festivals later in the year.<sup>24</sup> (Philippe Noble, e-mail to Lize Spit, August 31, 2017)

In 2022, sales dropped: 49 copies were sold of the large format, 1,711 of the pocket edition. According to Philippe Noble, this is still a good score for a book that has been on the market for several years. The next year is an interesting one: in February 2023, Actes Sud published *Je ne suis pas là* (I'm not here), the translation of Spit's second novel, also translated by Emmanuelle Tardif. The new book, and Lize Spit's concomitant promotional activities (essentially in Brussels) in the months following its publication, led to increasing sales of *Débâcle*. Strangely enough, the numbers picked up for the large format and not for the pocket edition, as one would expect. The pocket continues to sell too, though, at around 80 copies a month, according to the information Noble communicated to us. Anyhow, with over 37,000 copies sold, we can certainly speak of a success story for *Débâcle*.<sup>25</sup> As we will see in the next section, the publishing success of *Débâcle* was not random.

### *Promotional activities*

French publishers rarely get excited about a translation project involving a classic. They prefer recent titles by living authors who can help promote the translation. When this is not the case, the success of a translation

may depend on more random factors. An eloquent example is *La chambre noire de Damoclès* (The darkroom of Damocles, 1958) by W. F. Hermans, published in 2006 by Gallimard, whose sales took off thanks to a glowing review by Milan Kundera in *Le Monde*.

In France, *Débâcle* received a major boost in 2018, when the book benefited from the spotlights of the Phares du Nord promotional campaign. This campaign was a joint initiative of the Dutch Foundation for Literature and Flanders Literature to draw attention to Dutch-language literature. For the first run, eighteen authors were selected, among them Lize Spit. The writers were invited to come to France to give interviews and readings at festivals and introduce their work to the public. The organisers had associated themselves with writer and literary critic Margot Dijkgraaf, who for many years worked on a consultancy basis for the Dutch embassy in France, with a focus on literature. She was closely associated with the literary programming of the embassy and her important network in the French literary world allows her to build bridges between the two literatures.

The fact that Lize Spit is an intelligent and personable young woman who also speaks French makes her an ideal author to be actively involved in the promotion of a translation. Was this also a factor in the organisers' decision to choose *Débâcle* as one of the spearheads of its Phares du Nord campaign? When asked how they selected the participating titles, Margot Dijkgraaf said that they were simply recent translations and that the festival organisers decided independently which authors from the list they wanted to invite.

The organisers also arranged several literary evenings in collaboration with the Dutch embassy, as well as trips for publishers, journalists, and festival directors to Amsterdam and Antwerp, where they could meet their Dutch and Flemish colleagues. There was a website, Facebook and Twitter accounts, and brochures introducing the books to French publishers. The campaign was launched in 2017 but reached full swing in 2018 and 2019. The promotion of *Débâcle* by Phares du Nord continued after its publication, but the publishing house also organised separate promotional activities, including a presentation of the new literary season's releases at the end of January 2018 in Brussels (at Passa Porta), aimed at French-language booksellers and literary journalists, where Philippe Noble spoke with Lize Spit about the novel.

Lize Spit was invited to France four times as part of the Phares du Nord campaign: in March 2018, when *Débâcle* had just been released, she was at the Paris Book Fair for signing sessions at the Dutch stand, an interview with Margot Dijkgraaf, and a reading from the translation by a French writer. In May, she participated in a reading as part of a small festival organised by the Dutch Foundation for Literature and the Dutch

embassy. Also in May, she was in Montpellier at the Comédie du Livre festival, where the focus was on Dutch literature. Finally, in November, she participated in the Marathon d'Automne in Toulouse, where Dutch literature was once again featured via a guest of honour platform. Although it undoubtedly had a negligible effect on the French-speaking market, we should also mention Lize Spit and Emanuelle Tardif's participation in the Literary Translation Days (Literaire Vertaaldagen) symposium held in Amsterdam in December 2018, where they spoke about their collaboration.

After Phares du Nord, Flanders Literature took the lead in the promotion with its Flirt Flamand campaign, which seeks to make Flemish authors known in French-speaking Belgium and to build a bridge between French- and Dutch-language Belgian literature. This campaign started in 2019, when the Brussels Book Fair featured Flanders as guest of honour. Lize Spit was invited there with the French-speaking author Adeline Dieudonné. In 2021, after a break due to COVID-19, Flirt Flamand was revived through a playful initiative: a literary wedding between Lize Spit and French-speaking author Thomas Gunzig, with a symbolic ceremony to crown a literary experience: a romantic exchange via WhatsApp. This wedding was followed by eleven meetings between Flemish and French-speaking writers. Lize Spit was paired with novelist Jérôme Colin. In 2022, Flirt Flamand took the form of a poetry contest for both Dutch-speaking and French-speaking participants, who were invited to write a poem starting with a line written by Lize Spit and ending with a line by Thomas Gunzig.

A minor controversy arose during Flirt Flamand when Lize Spit and Jérôme Colin expressed their regret that their books had not been translated into “Belgian [French],” which would have given greater prominence to linguistic and cultural particularities (Spit and Colin 2021, n.p.). In an article published in the Belgian newspaper *De Standaard*, Lize Spit said that some of her readers had indignantly pointed out the French nature of the translation. She wrote: “For the artisans of language, crossing the language barrier is downright tragic: bye-bye proverbs, sayings, nuances, dialects, and, with them, a good deal of humour”<sup>26</sup> (Spit 2021, n.p.). Spit and Colin argued in favour of a committee responsible for selecting a few titles each year for translation and publication within Belgium.

In a reaction published in *Le Soir*, translators Guillaume Deneufbourg and Noëlle Michel compared this stance to the debate that shook the Netherlands when a white translator was chosen to translate Amanda Gorman's “The Hill We Climb.” They acknowledged that while Belgium's language communities share a common cultural space, each variety has its own idiosyncrasies—Flemish Dutch is not the Dutch-language equivalent of Belgian French. They also pointed out that Belgian authors often publish with either French or Dutch publishers, who wield significantly more market power than their Belgian counterparts. As a result, authors and

translators are often subject to editorial pressures aligned with the dominant linguistic norms of Paris or Amsterdam:

We can therefore legitimately regret the zeal of Dutch publishers who sometimes forget to favour more neutral forms, but also that of French publishers who are too keen to banish any asperity, any “regionalism,” in the name of a form of purism. In this respect, we can only encourage the players in the book chain, including publishers, to be more open to regional variants, in consultation with their translators.<sup>27</sup> (Deneufbourg and Michel 2021, n.p.)

### *Impact*

It is difficult to quantify the effect of this type of promotional activities on book sales, even when it is a one-time, high-profile event, because we do not have detailed sales figures: one would almost need to know the number of copies sold day-by-day. However, in the case of *Débâcle*, the numbers mentioned earlier give an overall idea of its success. While we do not have figures that would allow us to compare sales with those of other novels translated from Dutch, Philippe Noble assured us they are well above average.

Of course, the whole of this success cannot be attributed to the efforts of the two literature foundations—far from it. As mentioned earlier, Actes Sud had opted for an initial print run more than twice as large as usual. Philippe Noble told us that this decision was linked to the arrival of a new editorial director at Actes Sud, Manuel Tricoteaux, who felt that translations, once released, did not always benefit from sufficient marketing and publicity efforts from the publishing house, and who had chosen Lize Spit's book to try to obtain better results through a larger press campaign. He therefore took the risk of a larger initial print run, and *Débâcle* was pushed by both the Actes Sud press office and independent press agents. This decision may also have been motivated by an additional factor: the purchase of foreign rights at a relatively high price. However, since we do not have access to the precise financial details of the rights acquisition, which publishers are reluctant to share, this remains a supposition.

We do know that the book sold better than expected, and reviews provide an additional indicator of its perceived success. In the context of our research, reviews serve a dual function: not only do they reflect the effectiveness of upstream promotional and publicity efforts, but they also actively contribute to those efforts by shaping the books' public reception. For this chapter, we limited ourselves mostly to the media coverage report provided to Lize Spit by Actes Sud, which roughly covers the six months following the release of the translation—that is, the first half of 2018. Even

though this information was supplied to us by the author, further verification (albeit not exhaustive) suggests that the collection is quite complete and that there has been no data filtering. In addition to traditional media (newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts), it contains articles from online news outlets, blogs, and user reviews. In other words, we have opinions from professional readers and ordinary readers, which obviously do not all have the same scope. In this respect, one article deserves a special mention: a review published in the literary supplement of *Le Monde*, written by Leïla Slimani, a young novelist who has been very much in the limelight for the last few years and who won the Prix Goncourt 2016 for her novel *Chanson douce* (Lullaby), built around the murder of two children told through flashbacks. Her very positive review may have significantly boosted the sales of *Débâcle*. The qualification of “anti-Ferrante” she used (Slimani 2018, n.p.), undoubtedly motivated by Spit’s disillusioned description of friendship, was repeated several times by other readers and critics, which illustrates the impact of a review in an influential newspaper. There are other similar explicit cross-references to be found in other reviews, and the descriptive terms used to characterise the book also present many similarities, as will be discussed below. We can infer from the media coverage that many critics rely on the information provided by Actes Sud in its media kit. Indeed, many reviews contain recurring elements that probably originate from the publisher’s pitch. The advertising done by the publishing house thus appears to be effective.

None of the coverage mentions discovering the novel or its author at a festival. The contrast between the sweet appearance of the author and the harshness of the book, which can be striking when one meets Lize Spit, is mentioned only by the Belgian media that interviewed her. There is one notable exception: the newspaper *Midi Libre*, which speaks of her “angelic looks” (“un air angélique”) and her excellent French in its Montpellier edition of May 27, 2018, the day after her participation in the local festival Comédie du Livre.

### *Appreciation*

Professionals and readers alike stress the raw and implacable side of the hyperrealistic story, and its construction, which draws the reader into a relentless suspense. It is an unwholesome, disturbing book, a shocking read, almost unbearable for some. Terms often used to describe it include (hyper)realistic, sordid, unbearable, disturbing, and chilling. We can find similar reactions to the cover illustration on the French translation, a compelling photo by Flemish photographer Frieke Janssens from her *Smoking Kids* series, showing a little girl holding a cigarette. Those who discover the book in a bookstore are most often attracted to this cover illustration.

The cinematic aspect is frequently emphasised, mostly the plot and setting: Lize Spit is described as the Dardenne sister of literature or is compared to Larry Clark. The attempts to classify the novel in a certain category of literature are even more numerous, perhaps a sign that the book somewhat confuses its readers. Some critics talk about its resemblance to a thriller; others make connections with a wide variety of authors. Among the most interesting are two American novelists: Laura Kasischke, who also mixes hyperrealism, violence, and crudity, and David Vann, whose novel *Dirt* (2012) describes the slow descent into hell of a young man with a tortured mind. On the Belgian side, we find comparisons to Dimitri Verhulst's *De helaasheid der dingen* (The misfortunates) and *La vraie vie* (Real life) by Adeline Dieudonné, which both describe childhood in dysfunctional families.

Other critics, struck by the rural setting of a Flemish village, evoke a genre that currently enjoys some popularity in France: that of the (neo) rural novel, or even the rural teen novel, practised by authors such as Édouard Louis and Simon Johannin, who also depict disenchanted childhoods in villages marked by social misery. Interestingly, the term *coming-of-age novel*, which occurs frequently in reviews in the Dutch-language press, is nearly absent from the French-language reception. Without a more detailed follow-up study, we can only speculate as to why this is the case.

## Conclusion

The success of *Debâcle* on the French market is not a matter of pure luck but rather a result of a process shaped by several factors, the first of which was the choice made by the new and ambitious foreign series director Manuel Tricoteaux to try out a new promotion strategy for his foreign series using *Debâcle* as one of its first test cases. This involved a larger-than-average starting investment, both in financial terms and in terms of publicity and visibility.

The book also had the benefit of a positive dynamic, being the fruit of the association between a new Dutch publisher (Das Mag) with a new author (Lize Spit), a new literary translator (Emmanuelle Tardif), and a new foreign series director in France (Manuel Tricoteaux), but also being carried by a seasoned mediator able to interpret and bring together the interests and ambitions of the various agents in order to make the project a success. Philippe Noble indeed displays a typical mediator profile: he is a prolific multilingual translator, director of a foreign series in a major French publishing house, organiser of international networks, and a longtime fixture in the cultural diplomacy sphere.<sup>28</sup> He went far beyond his nominal role as a series director to become a real ambassador for Lize

Spit in the selection process, which preceded the promotional activities of the two literature foundations and Phares du Nord at the Salon du livre de Paris (March 17–20, 2016), and a mentor of Emmanuelle Tardif in the translation process. Afterwards, he also intervened sporadically in the post-production promotion process, for instance in programming venues in Paris or in accompanying Spit to strategic visibility events, at, among others, Passa Porta in February 2018.

As it appears, the Dutch Foundation for Literature and Flanders Literature played no direct role in the acquisition and selection process of *Débâcle*. Through the information they circulate, the foundations can—and usually do—contribute to the discovery of titles, even though the main information usually comes from the original publishers who present their authors at book fairs like those at Frankfurt and Paris, but this was not the case for *Débâcle*'s introduction on the French market, which was scouted and mediated by Philippe Noble. The literature foundations did intervene in the translation stage, by granting a translation subsidy to the French publisher, from which the translator also benefited.

Through their presence at major book fairs and festivals, the literature foundations were also involved in the reception process (see, for instance, [McMartin 2021](#)). However, these promotional activities are aimed more at networking and at the publishing world than at the general public. It would be useful to study in a more general way to what extent these literary events allow for bridges to be built between French- and Dutch-speaking literature in the medium and long run. The network formed can indeed be reactivated (or not) for subsequent projects. In any case, this specific micro-network was reactivated for Spit's second novel: Emmanuelle Tardif translated *Ik ben er niet* for Actes Sud at the request of both Lize Spit and Philippe Noble. *Je ne suis pas là* was published in February 2023 and received positive reviews, notably in the daily newspaper *Le Monde* and in *Livres Hebdo*, a magazine aimed at professionals in the publishing industry. To date, sales of the French translation stand at 6,359, an “excellent score in the current circumstances,”<sup>29</sup> commented Manuel Tricoteaux to Philippe Noble (Philippe Noble, e-mail to the authors, July 5, 2024), especially as the paperback version, intended for the mass market, is not yet available.

These findings have partly been possible thanks to a network-oriented approach, in which we followed a few key agents around a translation project, without making too many presuppositions about their role. Recalling Buzelin, “inasmuch as it consists of tracing the genesis of products called translations, [this approach enabled us] to acquire data to which translation theorists have rarely had access so far, namely data on the multiple mediators potentially involved in the translation process, including the way they make or explain their decisions [...] and the strategies by

which they negotiate their place in the process, convince others to participate, etc.” (Buzelin 2005, 215). Rapidly, it was obvious that one single agent, Philippe Noble, was present at each phase of the process. This contributes to the blurred boundaries between the different stages—that is, production, selection, translation, promotion and reception—and to the fact that his intervention was a key factor in *Débâcle*'s success. Does this mean that the success of Dutch-speaking literature in France in general is also conditioned by Noble's mediating activities? To our knowledge, Actes Sud is the only French publishing house to have a series director specifically in charge of Dutch-language literature and who also masters of the language. The series was put on the back burner for about ten years in 1992 when Noble left for the Netherlands. In other words, the viability of the series is linked with Noble's presence and might disappear when he retires (“I hope to continue for a few more years, but the end is inevitably near”<sup>30</sup>). The future will tell us more about the sustainability of these networks over time.

Even years after its publication, *Débâcle* continues to sell and be read. The release of the film adaptation by Veerle Baetens in autumn 2023 fell outside the scope of our research, but it has of course added yet another chapter to *Het smelt*'s remarkable circulation story. CBO Box-Office, which tracks cinema sales in France, reports 5,555 admissions for the film, of which 4,156 in the first week. The film remained in theatres for a month. By comparison, *The Broken Circle Breakdown* (2012, starring Veerle Baetens), one of the most watched Flemish films in France in recent years, attracted 197,413 admissions and remained in theatres for twenty weeks. In Belgium, *Débâcle* was seen by 129,286 spectators in 2023, including 3,055 in Wallonia and 5,938 in Brussels, where a subtitled Dutch-language version was screened.<sup>31</sup> It is therefore impossible to say exactly what proportion of the audience was French-speaking. In 2024, *Débâcle* received a Magritte du cinéma, a francophone prize ... for best Flemish film.

## Notes

- 1 We would like to thank Philippe Noble, Emmanuelle Tardif, Margot Dijkgraaf, Lucette Châtelain, and Lize Spit for having kindly accepted to be interviewed for this chapter. The interviews were conducted in Dutch and translated into English by the authors. The original transcription for each excerpt is included in a corresponding footnote.
- 2 Original text in Dutch: “Waar andere uitgeverijen met zo'n tweehonderd titels per jaar kwamen aanzetten, zouden zij er niet meer dan tien per jaar uitgeven. De tijd en energie die overbleven en vooral het geld dat daardoor bespaard werd, konden worden besteed aan redactie van en promotie rond het gelancerte boek.”
- 3 Original text in Dutch: “De concurrentie was sceptisch over de aanpak.”

- 4 Original text in Dutch: “Das Mag symboliseert de eeuwige jeugd in het literaire landschap. Ze fungeren als een antiroestmiddel in de literaire wereld, die toch een beetje vastgeroest zit. Ze doorbreken het wat gesloten aura dat vaak rond literatuur hangt en spreken met hun leesclubs en festivals een jonger publiek aan, dat andere uitgevers niet altijd bereiken. Ze zitten ook niet bij de postbus te wachten op ingestuurde manuscripten, maar organiseren zomerkampen voor aankomend talent.”
- 5 Original text in French: “[...] selon un parcours très traditionnel – et très français.”
- 6 Original text in French: “J’ai terminé ma vie professionnelle en m’occupant d’un petit réseau de coopération universitaire entre la France et les Pays-Bas.”
- 7 Original text in French: “La série ‘Lettres néerlandaises’ est une collection modeste : elle comprend trois ou au maximum quatre titres par ans.”
- 8 Original text in French: “Mais je n’ai jamais recommandé un livre que je n’avais pas lu moi-même.”
- 9 Original text in French: “L’accueil de la presse néerlandophone ou les chiffres de vente aux Pays-Bas et en Belgique ne sont jamais des facteurs décisifs, parce qu’ils ne sont absolument pas transposables à l’étranger.”
- 10 Original text in French: “Malgré la lenteur du récit, le livre m’a captivé, par la rigueur de sa construction, par sa subtilité psychologique, son hyperréalisme et la noirceur de sa vision.”
- 11 Original text in French: “Normalement, ce genre de ‘matraquage,’ de ‘hype,’ comme on dit aujourd’hui, m’énerve et ne m’incite pas du tout à lire le livre ainsi porté aux nues. Mais les interviews-portraits de l’autrice, publiés notamment par *De Standaard*, m’ont fait changé d’avis: l’intelligence des réponses de Lize Spit, la chaleur et la simplicité qui se dégagent de sa personnalité m’ont séduit.”
- 12 Original text in Dutch: “Het is waar dat ik aanvankelijk had bedacht dat het boek het beste in de reeks ‘Actes Noirs’ kon verschijnen, niet omdat ik het in mijn eigen reeks niet wilde opnemen, maar omdat het daarmee kans maakte op hogere oplagen. Het is nu terug bij mijn eigen reeks, waar ik me zeer op verheug.”
- 13 Original text in Dutch: “Ik hoop dat ik niet onbeleefd was er in ons gesprek zo op door te vragen, naar de lijn waarin het boek gepubliceerd zal worden, ik denk dat een goede vertaling en onder de juiste vleugels verschijnen belangrijker zijn dan de oplage, natuurlijk. Het is niet gezond voor een boek als het ‘vermomd’ wordt als een thriller of misdaad-boek, wanneer het er in strikte zin geen is. Ik ben vereerd dat *Het Smelt* in uw reeks zal verschijnen, en het is natuurlijk fijn te lezen dat u er mee op zal toezien.”
- 14 Original text in French: “Qui ne se connaissent pas, si ce n’est en termes de clichés.”
- 15 Original text in French: “J’avais remarqué son talent. Elle venait de traduire pour ma collection *Quartet* d’Anna Enquist et j’avais été très satisfait de son travail. Cependant elle n’avait jamais traduit de roman aussi long (ni aussi difficile) et je me suis engagé, à la fois pour la rassurer elle-même et pour prévenir d’éventuelles réticences de l’éditeur, à relire son travail chapitre par chapitre, au fur et à mesure de sa progression.”
- 16 Original text in French: “Quant au ciblage du public, je n’y ai pas du tout pensé et cela me paraît d’ailleurs inutile, voire néfaste.”
- 17 Original text in French: “On ne peut pas servir un public au détriment des autres. Emmanuelle est une Française qui vit en Hollande, mais elle a grandi

- et étudié à Lille et connaît bien la Belgique. Je l'ai d'ailleurs aidée sur certains aspects culturels typiquement flamands, et Lize Spit a fait de même. Mais Emmanuelle a une formation de journaliste et sait très bien où chercher ce qu'elle ne connaît pas. Je sais qu'il y a eu en Belgique francophone des polémiques sur cet aspect de la traduction, mais je les trouve infondées. Emmanuelle a très bien introduit certains termes spécifiques, juste ce qu'il faut à mon avis pour raviver la couleur locale, et ce n'est pas en multipliant les belgicisms qu'on rend une traduction plus juste ou plus intéressante."
- 18 Original text in French: "Et là aussi, je tranche en général en dernier ressort, mais (presque) toujours dans l'harmonie."
- 19 Original text in Dutch: "Hij is een beetje ongelukkig met de Franse titel *Ca fond*, waarvan hij vindt dat het niet echt 'bekt,' zoals toneelmensen zeggen. Dat geef ik zelf ook toe, maar Emmanuelle en ik hebben altijd deze titel verdedigd (ik eventueel met een uitroepteken in *het Frans: Ca fond!*), omdat het, als letterlijke vertaling, ook het beste functioneert in verband met de inhoud van de vertelling."
- 20 Original text in Dutch: "Dit is inderdaad een lastige kwestie. Toen ik vorige week in Frankrijk met familieleden over het boek vertelde, verstonden ze de titel niet meteen. Ik moest dan uitleggen: *Ça fond, du verbe fondre*. Iets aan deze twee woorden toevoegen, zoals in de Duitse versie, lijkt me een goed idee, zolang de nadruk op het smelten zelf, het proces, niet verloren gaat. *Et ça fond* is dan beter, maar 'bekt' misschien nog niet goed genoeg. Zou *Et puis ça fond* een oplossing kunnen bieden? Of, maar iets langer: *En attendant que ça fonde/Pendant que ça fond*? Met een andere invalshoek zou men ook kunnen kiezen voor *Ça va fondre*, wat de nadruk legt om Eva's plannen voor haar allerlaatste levensdag."
- 21 Original text in Dutch: "Dat brainstormen, is een goed iets. [. . .] Ja, ik denk dat *Ca Fond* niet steeds heel duidelijk is. Ik heb het ook al gehad, dat het niet echt 'neerviel' in een gesprek. Et puis *ca fond/pendant que ca fond* vind ik te overwegen. *Ca va fondre* is ook een optie, als dat niet te veel weggeeft (m'n eigen Frans is niet goed genoeg om werkelijk aan te voelen wat er inhoudelijk en gelaagd werkt en wat niet.) Wat zijn jullie gedachten over *le dégel*? Of is dat veel meer een weersverschijnsel?"
- 22 Original text in French: "Cela fait beaucoup de monde pour quelques lignes et la montagne accouche parfois d'une souris, mais c'est toujours ainsi."
- 23 The sales figures were supplied by Philippe Noble, who received them from Manuel Tricoteaux.
- 24 Original text in Dutch: "Inmiddels is Emmanuelle's vertaling al een tijdje naar Actes Sud en de mensen daar hebben nu de tekst kunnen lezen—en wat denkt u? Manuel Tricoteaux, hoofdredacteur buitenlandse literatuur, is laaiend enthousiast en wil dat de roman de nodige aandacht krijgt. [. . .]  
– Manuel denkt aan een 'mise en place' van 10,000 exemplaren—in gewone mensentaal betekent dit dat het meteen in een oplage van 10,000 wordt gedrukt, wat veel is voor een eerste vertaling; het zorgt voor grote zichtbaarheid in de boekhandel, wat altijd een cruciaal punt is.  
– Op de een of andere manier zult u in februari een paar dagen vrij moeten houden om naar Parijs te komen, en misschien zal er later in het jaar ook gelegenheid zijn om deel te nemen aan literair festivals."
- 25 The Dutch-language book with the best sales numbers in Actes Sud's series is the non-fiction book *Congo* by the Belgian author David Van Reybrouck, which sold about 100,000 copies.

- 26 Original text in Dutch: “Voor mensen die juist in de wereld van de taal opereren is de barrière louter tragisch—au revoir spreekwoorden, zegswijzen, nuance, spreektaal, dialecten en daarmee ook een heel stuk humor.”
- 27 Original text in French: “Aussi peut-on légitimement regretter le zèle de maisons d’édition néerlandaises qui oublient parfois de privilégier des formes plus neutres, mais aussi celui de maisons françaises qui ont trop à cœur de chasser toute aspérité, tout ‘régionalisme.’ au nom d’une forme de purisme. Sur ce plan, on ne saurait qu’encourager les acteurs de la chaîne du livre, dont les éditeurs, à s’ouvrir davantage aux variantes régionales, en concertation avec leurs traducteurs.”
- 28 For more information about Philippe Noble’s mediating activities, see [Deneufbourg \(2023\)](#).
- 29 Original text in French: “À ce jour, les ventes de *Je ne suis pas là* s’élèvent à 6,359 exemplaires. Manuel Tricoteaux, qui m’a communiqué ce chiffre, a ajouté ce commentaire: ‘un excellent score dans les circonstances actuelles.’”
- 30 Original text in French: “J’espère continuer encore quelques années, mais la fin approche nécessairement.”
- 31 Matthew DeBoysere (Flanders Audiovisual Fund), pers. comm., July 12, 2024.

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## 9 Selecting and Publishing Dutch Literature in Turkey

### The Case of Arnon Grunberg's Graphic Novel *Van Istanbul naar Baghdad* in Turkish

*Irmak Mertens*

This chapter explores how Dutch literary works enter the Turkish literary field in translation through a case study of the Turkish translation of the graphic novel *Van Istanbul naar Baghdad* (2010; From Istanbul to Baghdad), written by Arnon Grunberg and illustrated by Hanco Kolk. The Turkish translation, *İstanbul'dan Bağdat'a*, was translated by Gül Özlen and published in 2015 by the independent, Istanbul-based Alef Publishing House (in Turkish: Alef Yayınevi), one of the few Turkish publishers of Dutch literature in translation. In the graphic novel, Grunberg is both the intradiegetic and the autodiegetic narrator: he narrates his own storyworld and adventures as the protagonist in a way similar to a travelogue. The graphic novel portrays his odyssey from Istanbul to Baghdad, passing through Kurdish regions and Syria. During this journey, Grunberg encounters people from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds but his mind's eye constantly, hauntingly returns to a photograph taken during the Halabja massacre depicting a deceased infant. The graphic novel engages with culturally and nationally sensitive subjects, including Atatürk and his ideological legacy, as well as the Kurdish populations in the Middle East, for which the Halabja massacre remains a collective trauma.

Drawing on interviews with the Turkish publisher, the Dutch illustrator, and a representative at the Dutch Foundation for Literature (Nederlands Letterenfonds), which supported the translation, this chapter centres on the selection and publication decisions made by the Turkish publisher: what were the underlying factors that influenced his choice to publish *İstanbul'dan Bağdat'a* (Grunberg 2015), and Dutch literature more generally, particularly given that doing so involved little to no financial gain? By focusing the study on a one-person publishing house and on the coming-into-being of a translated graphic novel, we shed light on the often ad hoc process of selecting and publishing translated literary works in a niche genre by a niche publisher whose unconventional choices eschew standard practices in Dutch–Turkish literary exchange.

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After discussing the analytical framework and methodology, the chapter presents an investigation of Alef Publishing House and proceeds to an analysis of the interview data. Despite its idiosyncrasies, Alef is revealed to be an important conduit of Dutch literature in Turkish, mainly motivated by the pursuit of symbolic capital and the personal tastes of its publisher.

## **Analytical framework and methodology**

### *Sociology of translation*

Sociologists of translation understand the transnational circulation of translated literary works to be determined by numerous interdependent parameters which are connected through agents within what Gisèle [Sapiro \(2008, 2020\)](#) has termed the transnational literary field. Translators, editors, critics, literary foundations, and other agents can both influence and be influenced by one another in the literary field. Competing for limited symbolic, economic, and social resources, they may be influenced by literary prizes, translation subsidies, the prospect of economic or symbolic profits, personal taste, the taste of trusted acquaintances, reception in the source or target culture, paratextual framing, advertising, and so on. Prior to encountering these parameters on the transnational level, the intrinsic qualities of a literary work may already grant it a measure of local success or provide a reliable starting point for its selection, translation, and publication by foreign publishers.

Working from a similar conceptual vantage point, several previous studies have discussed the circulation of translated literary works from the Low Countries, emphasising the impact of such agents. Focusing specifically on literary transfer between Dutch and English, [van Es and Heilbron \(2015, 298\)](#) offer a “multi-level field approach,” composed of macro, meso, and micro levels, that serves to explain how Dutch literary works gain access to the English-language publishing field. At the macro level, global power dynamics influence which languages and countries shape the selection of translations. Dutch works that reach Anglophone markets often pass first through German or French, for instance ([van Es and Heilbron 2015, 297–99](#)). The meso level concerns mostly national fields and the strategies translation publishers use to acquire translation and publishing rights, for instance, by exploiting subsidies or making their decisions contingent on success in the original language market ([van Es and Heilbron 2015, 300–301](#)). The micro level concerns the various actors involved in the selection, translation, and framing of individual books, including the tendency to frame Dutch books either in terms of their explicit “Dutchness” or their cosmopolitan appeal ([van Es and Heilbron 2015, 302–3](#)). One of the main points of their analysis is that a literary work

in Dutch must first be acknowledged in its local field and carry either symbolic or economic profit (van Es and Heilbron 2015, 300). Generally, it is only under these circumstances that a Dutch literary work will be translated into the central languages of French and German, which often enables translation in hypercentral English. During this process, receiving positive feedback from the various agents in the network, such as critics or editors, facilitates attaining international visibility for the author (van Es and Heilbron 2015, 299, 302). Another finding is that the translation of Dutch literary works is prioritised by small-scale publishers that are generally motivated by the prospect of symbolic capital (prestige). Only a small number of Dutch authors (with Arnon Grunberg among them) can be said to have received symbolic capital on an international scale (van Es and Heilbron 2015, 301, 306), mainly thanks to the efforts of small-scale translation publishers.

In their article proposing a sociological model for studying the transnational circulation of a single translated literary work, [McMartin and Gentile \(2020\)](#) examine how Stefan Hertmans's *Oorlog en terpentijn* (2013; War and turpentine)—a novel from the peripheral language of Dutch, and within it, the even more peripheral region of Flanders—become a widely translated international success. They not only outline the multiple agents involved in the circulation of this literary work, but also confirm that *Oorlog en terpentijn*'s translation and reception in the Anglophone world had a pivotal influence on its trajectory in other language markets ([McMartin and Gentile 2020](#), 17). All in all, they conclude that the success of this novel emphasises the role and the impact of English-speaking critics while also demonstrating “the interactions across co-implicated cycles of creation, production and reception mediated via the transnational literary field” ([McMartin and Gentile 2020](#), 18).

Furthermore, focusing on a case study of Serbian translations of Dutch literature, [Budimir \(2020\)](#) analyses translation flows in the 1990s and post-2000s, which have divergent inclinations due to Serbia's political and social transitions as well as other trends ([Budimir 2020](#), 229). Her work provides an example for examining translation activities between peripheral countries, providing useful insights for this study. Her results demonstrate that factors such as receiving funding from the Dutch Foundation for Literature, or the profile of the selected translators, played a crucial role in the translation exchange between these countries ([Budimir 2020](#), 232).

In her article exploring the role of publishers, translators, and literature foundations in the transnational circulation of Dutch literature in Italy, [Gentile \(2021\)](#) elaborates that the literary transfer between the two peripheries mostly depends on committed editors, publishers, and translators. From her numerous interviews with employees at the Dutch Foundation

for Literature and Flanders Literature (Literatuur Vlaanderen), Italian translators, and translation publishers in Italy, she draws the conclusion that grants managers take an active role as cultural mediators, offering recommendations for literary releases to foreign publishers, whereas translators' work often goes beyond simply translating and includes helping to develop publishers' marketing and selection strategies. Moreover, [Gentile \(2021, 124\)](#) points out that Italian publishers often rely on such recommendations due to lack of familiarity with Dutch literature.

However, while the abovementioned studies offer a solid foundation for future research on the circulation of Dutch literature, there remains a need for investigations of as-yet-unstudied language markets and actors. This chapter focuses on translation from Dutch to Turkish and foregrounds a small-scale publishing house that primarily operates on personal taste, family relations, and symbolic capital. To my knowledge, there is no research available on the circulation of Dutch literature in Turkey from the viewpoint of the sociology of translation. As [Hedberg and Vimr \(2022, 754\)](#) suggest, the investigation of how literature from the periphery is exported into another periphery is imperative. Specifically, these investigations enhance our comprehension of the functioning of global literary flows, shifting the emphasis away from Anglophone literature and towards literary policies and practices in non-English contexts. Consequently, they offer a more comprehensive understanding of periphery-to-periphery literary transfer and the literary systems it connects.

### *Methodology*

Taking its conceptual cues from the framework discussed above, the analysis is based on interviews with the Turkish publisher and paratextual materials of the graphic novel *İstanbul'dan Bağdat'a*. A semi-structured and a structured interview were conducted with the publisher of Alef Publishing House, on January 24, 2021, and April 6, 2023, respectively. Furthermore, structured interviews were carried out on April 7, 2023, with Hanco Kolk, the Dutch illustrator of *Van Istanbul naar Baghdad*, whose illustrations were also used in the Turkish version, as well as with the grants manager at the Dutch Foundation for Literature. The interviews with the publisher took place via video conference. Several spontaneous follow-up questions were posed based on his responses. The interviews with the illustrator and grants manager were conducted by email.

Because the interview with the publisher indicated that manipulations of the paratext were an important part of the publishing process in this case, an analysis of the paratextual elements (i.e., front and back covers, blurbs, bio notes, etc.) was also conducted, focusing on aspects that were altered to accommodate the Turkish audience. A paratext is the totality

of the elements that frame a certain text in order to present it as a book “a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public” (Genette 1987, 4). Paratext within the spatial boundaries of the book is categorised as a peritext, which includes but is not limited to the name of the author, the name and the logo of the publisher, illustrations, the title of the literary work, blurbs, biographies, genre indication, etc., for which a publisher is responsible (Genette 1987, 25).

In the following sections, I provide a detailed profile of the Turkish publisher and discuss the coming-into-being of *İstanbul’dan Bağdat’a*.

### **Alef Publishing House in relation to Dutch–Turkish literary transfer**

Alef Publishing House is an Istanbul-based, independent publishing house that has been active since 2006. Its publisher described it as a niche publishing house comparable to other Turkish small-scale publishers such as Jaguar Books, Siren Publishing, and Yüz Books. Its staff consists of three people: the publisher, his wife, who assists in an unofficial capacity, and a part-time editor. Before founding Alef, the publisher had worked as an editor, editorial director, and translator for large-scale publishing houses in Turkey. He is the only full-time employee. Alef has published forty books between 2006 and 2024, which can be categorised in the following genres: novel (25), poetry (4), novella (2), graphic novel (2), art (2), politics/non-fiction (2), music (1), travel (1), and verse novel (1). Alef thus mainly focuses on literary works, particularly novels and novel-like genres (e.g., graphic novels and verse novels). The majority of the authors represented in the catalogue are of non-Turkish origin and the majority of works (twenty-eight out of forty) are translations into Turkish. The source languages of the translated titles include Dutch (7), English (7), Spanish (6), German (5), French (1), Italian (1), and Russian (1). One in four translations in the (albeit limited) catalogue were from Dutch, a somewhat surprising finding. In the global marketplace for translated literary works, where English generally supplies the majority of source titles (McMartin and Gentile 2020, 6) and demonstrates its hegemony in most commercial genres (Sapiro 2016, 87; Stougaard-Nielsen 2019, 186), the fact that Alef publishes an equal amount of translated literature from English and Dutch is notable and identifies it as one of the few Turkish publishers that regularly publish Dutch literature in translation.<sup>1</sup>

To my knowledge, the earliest instance of a Dutch author translated in Turkish in the modern era dates to 1941: *Deliliğe Methiye* (In praise of folly, translated by Nusret Hızır) a translation from the Latin of Erasmus’s *Moriae Encomium* (see Barut 2020, 229). McMartin reveals that between

the years 1998 and 2021, a total of 232 books were translated from Dutch into Turkish, making Turkish “peripheral” as an export language from Dutch, “with a two-percent share or less of the total” (McMartin 2020, 151–52). Similar to McMartin (2020), van Es and Heilbron (2015, 304) use the translation database maintained by the Dutch Foundation for Literature, as it “encapsulates a large part of the translations made from Dutch literature.” According to the website, there are 386 translations (including re-editions of existing translations) available from Dutch to Turkish, the oldest of which is *Benim Tatlı Günlerim* (1971, translated by Mete Ergin), the Turkish translation of Simon Vestdijk’s *De koperen tuin* (The copper garden, 1950). Notably, although Turkish does not share common geographical or cultural assets with the Dutch language area, there are sizeable communities of people of Turkish descent living in the Netherlands and Flanders and there are a handful of Turkish-Dutch authors such as Özcan Akyol and Murat Işık (see Linn 2023).

Overall, in view of the quantity of Dutch–Turkish translations as well as the relatively late entry of Dutch literature in Turkey, Alef, with its seven Dutch–Turkish translations, can be considered a small-scale but nonetheless important publisher linking the Dutch and Turkish literary fields. When asked why he was drawn to Dutch literature, Alef’s publisher offered a trifold response: firstly, his first-ever translated book was from Dutch, Arnon Grunberg’s 2006 novel *Tirza* (published in Turkish in 2008 under the same title, translated by Gül Özlen), and this (positive) experience created an enduring connection with agents in the Dutch literary field and with Dutch literature more generally; secondly, the promise of a translation subsidy from the Dutch Foundation for Literature made it possible to consider books that would otherwise not be financially feasible (although he reiterated that he would still consider publishing translated Dutch literature without any financial support); and lastly (and for him, most importantly), his personal taste is compatible with the topics many Dutch authors are writing on. He clarified these topics as immigration, the climate crisis, political matters, and human rights, while adding that he personally enjoyed Dutch authors’ unique literary styles as well. Arnon Grunberg and his *Van Istanbul naar Baghdad* is a case in point, which we take up in the next section.

### From *Van Istanbul naar Baghdad* to *İstanbul’dan Bağdat’a*

In this section, we retrace the motivations surrounding the selection and publication of *İstanbul’dan Bağdat’a*, drawing on interview data from the Turkish publisher, the Dutch illustrator, and the grants manager at the Dutch Foundation for Literature. We frame the analysis around three aspects that arose inductively during the interviews: (1) the perceived risks

of publishing the translation, (2) the perceived risk reducers, and (3) the translation's paratext.

*Risks: Controversial themes*

When asked why he selected *Van Istanbul naar Baghdad* for translation and publication, the Turkish publisher emphasised the book's controversial and contradictory nature and its setting in the Kurdish region:

*Van Istanbul naar Baghdad*. [...] It is in contrast with the hegemonic ideology in Turkey. And of course, this segregating, discriminative political stance in Turkey has ostracized the liberal intellectuals the most. Grunberg's stance is such a critical position. He criticizes the contemporary world. It's really obtrusive. [...] In 2015 [the year the translation was published], if you showed this novel to other [Turkish] publishers, they would not have liked it at all. This book is fully contradictory. Grunberg also risks being labelled as an Orientalist only because he visits Turkey. Readers and critics are so merciless in this country.<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, it was Grunberg's willingness to take a critical stance towards a controversial topic—and the Turkish publisher's willingness to do the same—that attracted him to the book. Particularly, its inclusion of the Halabja massacre, the chemical weapons attack on March 16, 1988, by the Iraqi military on the northern Iraqi Kurdish town of Halabja that killed thousands of Kurds and lingers in the collective memory, made a major impact in his decision to publish the book. The illustrations by Kolk strengthened this conviction. At the same time, he knew that “Turkish readers do not want to be bothered with global politics or the immigrants; they are in search of a text that has nothing to do with them, that will not criticize them, something that will not remind them of Turks and Kurds when they see Belgium and Congo.”<sup>3</sup> And yet, he gave them the opposite, anticipating that *Istanbul'dan Bağdat'a* would have a controversial reception in the Turkish market. Nor could he fall back on the book's performance in the Dutch market. Although Grunberg is one of the few Dutch authors whose profile extends beyond the Dutch-speaking world (e.g., he lives in New York City and many of his works have been widely translated and acclaimed), this particular work saw a very limited circulation and reception in Dutch. Grunberg is virtually unknown in Turkey. Thus, the Turkish publisher's conviction to select the book for its controversial themes contradicts conventional thinking about how most translation publishers rationalise selection decisions. It is often assumed that translation publishers privilege factors like strong sales and literary prizes in the

home market, feedback that make publishing a translation “a less risky enterprise” (Buzelin 2006, 137).

*Risk reducers: Translation support*

Another topic discussed with the publisher was translation subsidies. As Vimr (2022, 842) points out, “translation subsidies play an important part in what may be called maintaining the translation tradition around a particular literature.” In 2015, Alef Publishing House received a subsidy from the Dutch Foundation for Literature covering 70% of the translation costs for *İstanbul’dan Bağdat’a*, according to our interview with the foundation itself. The Turkish publisher also claimed that the foundation assisted him in negotiating an agreement with the publishers Uitgeverij Podium and Uitgeverij Vrijdag, which co-produced the original graphic novel, although my contact at the foundation disputed this. It is noteworthy that the translator of the graphic novel, Özlen, is a personal acquaintance of the publisher and his wife. As the Dutch Foundation for Literature requires foreign publishers to select from their own list of accredited translators as a prerequisite for a translation subsidy, it was important that Özlen be included on that list before Alef Publishing House applied for a subsidy (she already was). The publisher did not require Özlen to submit a sample translation, as he called her “the best translator from Dutch to Turkish,”<sup>4</sup> and that reputation was more than sufficient to assuage any fears about translation quality. Thus, on the one hand, it is evident that the translator’s personal acquaintance and reputation with the publisher was a contributing factor in her selection. On the other hand, the fact that Özlen was already accredited by the Dutch Foundation for Literature also played a role.

The publisher did emphasise that one factor outweighed the promise of a subsidy: if he enjoyed a book personally, he would not hesitate to move ahead with an unsubsidised translation. This observation reinforces the notion that personal taste constitutes a pivotal element in his decision-making process. Regrettably, Özlen, the translator, declined to engage in any discussion regarding the graphic novel or the circumstances surrounding her interactions with both the author and the publisher, thereby rendering our insights into this situation less comprehensive. Our speculative interpretation of her firm refusal to participate in the interview process may have to do with the fact that she is portrayed as a character within the graphic novel in a way that could be perceived as unfavourable.

*Paratextual framing*

The final topic discussed pertained to the paratextual framing of the graphic novel, encompassing contributions not only from the Turkish publisher

but also from Hanco Kolk, the Dutch illustrator. While many of Kolk's illustrations were adopted unchanged in the Turkish version, several notable changes were made by Kolk at the Turkish publisher's request, particularly to the front and back covers. The front cover of the Dutch graphic novel features a white and grey background with a centrally positioned portrait of Grunberg, illustrated by Kolk. Beneath the portrait are the names of the author and illustrator, the title of the graphic novel, the publisher's name, and the designation *graphic novel*. These elements are rendered in white text, accentuated by a red text highlight that draws attention. The minimalist design emphasises the author as the focal point, with no additional elements competing for attention. In contrast, the front cover of the Turkish edition also has a white and grey background but centres on a long line of men and women dressed in what appears to be traditional Anatolian and Middle Eastern folk attire, holding hands and dancing. The line stretches beyond view, suggesting continuity and depth. Below this central illustration, the Turkish title is prominently displayed, followed by the names of the author and illustrator, the publisher's name, and the designation *grafik roman*. While the font and colour choices closely mirror those of the Dutch edition, the Turkish title is positioned above the author and illustrator's names, creating a subtle variation in emphasis.

The Dutch back cover opens with an emphatic exclamation: "Arnon Grunberg in het Midden-Oosten: de graphic novel!" (Arnon Grunberg in the Middle East: The graphic novel!). Below this headline, a summary of the novel is provided. Notably, there are no blurbs, but at the bottom of the cover, photos of the author and illustrator are featured alongside short biographical notes. The Turkish back cover, bears a similar heading, "Bir grafik romanda—Ortadoğu seyahati" (In a graphic novel—a Middle Eastern trip), though it lacks the exclamation mark found in the Dutch version. Below the heading is the book summary; however, it is followed by two blurbs from *De Groene Amsterdammer and Cultuurbewust*. Unlike the Dutch version, there are no photos or biographical notes for the author or illustrator. Instead, the back cover is horizontally divided by a vertical strip listing the cities Grunberg visited, arranged as "İstanbul'dan [from Istanbul], Ankara, Konya, Adana, Antakya, Halep, Gaziantep, Nusaybin, Diyarbakır, Erbil, Kerkük, Bağdat'a [to Baghdad]." This design choice highlights Turkey as the predominant setting, emphasising the journey itself. Unlike the Dutch back cover, where Grunberg's and Kolk's identities are foregrounded, the Turkish version shifts the focus towards the trip, replacing biographical details with blurbs. The Dutch back cover, with its emphasis on Grunberg's and Kolk's identities through their photos and bios, underscores the importance of the creators as central figures in the narrative. In contrast, the Turkish back cover shifts focus towards the journey itself, with the listed cities serving as a geographical marker

that draws attention to the story's setting as well as its cultural and socio-political context. This difference in design reflects distinct approaches: while the Dutch edition highlights the prominence and credibility of its creators, the Turkish version emphasises the narrative's immersive Middle Eastern journey, framing the story as an exploration.

When asked how these changes came about, Kolk stated that the Turkish publisher felt Grunberg's portrait would not be appealing to Turkish readers. Nonetheless, he was given freedom in designing the Turkish cover illustration, so long as he removed Grunberg's face. Kolk said during the interview that it was completely his own choice and artistic vision to draw happy people dancing, which seems to resemble *halay*, a traditional folk dance popular in Turkey and the Middle East. He did not elaborate on any further motivations underpinning this choice, such as ethnographic representation, a personal aspiration to foster unity among the region's inhabitants despite ongoing political tensions, or other possible considerations. However, he added that his choice of illustrating dancing people was quite intentional, as he perceived it to reflect "the most touching scenes of the voyage."<sup>5</sup> In addition, he reported that he was not consulted for other changes to the front and back covers. The publisher explained that he made the decision to replace the biographies and the photographs with blurbs as the authors are not well known in Turkey and the "grumpy"<sup>6</sup> portrait of Grunberg would not suit the Turkish market. Furthermore, he reported that the choice of depicting people dancing together was made to impress the readers. Lastly, when asked why he added a list of the cities visited in the graphic novel on the back cover, he responded:

Adana, Diyarbakır, Ankara ... These are all different cities. Cities that have their own characteristics. But the differences between cities is a very unpopular topic to talk about because of the unitary state in Turkey. In other words, it is rarely a topic of serious talk. I would especially want the Kurds to buy this book and check it out.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, the decision to identify individual Turkish cities by name in the paratext was an explicit effort to acknowledge the regional diversity of Turkey, and particularly the existence of the Kurdish minority, in a country that is often presented as unitary and (politically) homogenous. The changes to the cover art perform a similar move by making individuals visible, but also add a consolatory note by having them join hands. In any case, anecdotal evidence from the publisher suggests that these paratextual changes, aimed at tailoring the book to a Turkish/Kurdish readership, missed their mark. He reported that, from the impressions he got from readers' comments he had encountered, some Kurdish readers balked at the book ("If you [a non-Kurd] have something to say about me, I do not

have to read it”<sup>8</sup>). Sales were also far from ideal: *İstanbul’dan Bağdat’a* was printed in a run of 2,000 copies, out of which 400 were sold.

### Discussion and conclusion

According to [van Es and Heilbron \(2015\)](#), a multi-level field approach requires the analyses of macro, meso, and micro levels in the literary field, as explained earlier on. On the macro level, Dutch literary works tend to be translated in English if they have been previously translated in German or French and have received a positive reception in those respective fields ([van Es and Heilbron 2015](#), 299). However, in our case, no German, French, or English translations of *Van Istanbul naar Baghdad* existed at the time the Turkish translation rights were purchased because the Turkish translation was the first. (An Arabic translation appeared in 2017.) The discrepancy can be attributed to the periphery-to-periphery relationship rather than the periphery-to-(hyper)central trajectory van Es and Heilbron focus on. As the interviews uncovered, the personal preferences of the publisher seemed to overrule or at least counter macro-level power imbalances among the world’s literary languages. The fact that Alef’s list contains equal numbers of translations from Dutch and English supports this claim.

At the meso level, [van Es and Heilbron \(2015, 300–301\)](#) note that translated Dutch literature is typically published by small-scale, independent publishers who tend to limit their selections to those books that achieved (economic and/or symbolic) success within their national borders. Alef Publishing House fits the profile of a typical translation publisher but did not base its selection in this case on the previous success of *Van Istanbul naar Baghdad*, which did not circulate widely in Dutch and did not see much of a reception. Rather, its selection seems to have to do with the book’s controversial subject matter, which resonated with the Turkish publisher both because it dealt with themes of importance to Turkey (vis-à-vis the Kurdish minority in Turkey) and because it did so in a provocative way. That Grunberg is a prize-winning writer and is among the most well-known Dutch-language writers working today apparently did not influence the Turkish publisher one way or the other (although he did not view Grunberg’s status in a negative light, except to speculate that his graphic novel could be perceived as Orientalist by some readers). Nor can we speak of an “elective affinity” ([van Es and Heilbron 2005, 301](#)) between Alef and publishers in other national fields that also acquired the title, since Alef was the first to purchase translation rights for the book. As the interviews revealed, as long as the publisher likes the themes and style of the book, and as long as it suits his goals of publishing provocative work of relevance to Turkish readers, other indications of economic or

symbolic success matter less to him, to the extent that he is willing to risk incurring a financial loss, as he did in the case of *İstanbul'dan Bağdat'a*.

Finally, on the micro level, van Es and Heilbron (2005, 302) explain that publishers exert significant influence as the gatekeepers in selecting foreign literature to be published and add that their decisions can be impacted by the positive or negative feedback from other agents in the literary field, such as translators or critics. In our case, the publisher assumes the role of a “multi-mediator” (Coldiron 2022, 489), shouldering the roles of multiple agents on his own, as he is the founder, owner and the chief editor of the publishing house, as well as the only full-time employee. As such, selection, acquisition, publication, and marketing processes are consolidated in his person. This situation is remarkable because it allows very little space for external influence between these various processes.

Although the present case study is idiosyncratic and does not align with expectations discussed by translation sociologists, it is important to acknowledge the role Alef has in affirming and defending the works they publish. In that sense, the publisher fits the role of “cultural banker” (Bourdieu 1993, 77) and creator of literary creators (Bourdieu 1996, 167–68), which in this case involves both Grunberg and Özlen. However, Alef had little interest in *re-creating* the author for a Turkish readership. To the contrary, he removed the author’s face from the cover art and his bio from the verbal peritext. His reasons for publishing Dutch literature in Turkish translation relate primarily to the book’s engagement with social and political issues—an evaluative criterion he deems more significant than others. Consequently, it can be inferred that his motivations for publishing Dutch literature are not driven by the preferences of a generally apathetic target audience within the politically sensitive context of Turkey. Rather, he publishes these novels despite and against it. This connects to Bourdieu’s (1996, 167–68) argument that such “creators of creators” may pursue the goal of expressing their political stance and social awareness through symbolic goods, which can yield not only the symbolic profit of prestige within the field, but also an activist status by proxy. As Mansell (2021, 283) notes, “publishers too can base their decisions on activist principles,” especially according to “the general political and social climate.” This is consistent with our publisher’s assertions that his goal in selecting *Van Istanbul naar Baghdad* was to provoke a reaction among Turkish readers, whether it be negative or positive. Evidently, pursuing reactions and making decisions based on personal taste, despite the opinions of others, are extensions of this activist mindset.

The negative relationship between symbolic profit and economic profit suggests that the autonomous pole of the field of cultural production undermines commercial success (Bourdieu 1993, 39, 48). As the position of the publisher moves further away from heteronomy in the

autonomous–heteronomous spectrum, the profit motive diminishes to the extent that a book that loses money for a publishing house like Alef may be seen as proof of its symbolic value. Nonetheless, taking an autonomous position cannot be reduced to a binary of interestedness or disinterestedness, as economic reductionism does not exclude publishers' innately ambivalent behaviour (Bourdieu 1996, 148; Johnson and Bourdieu 1993: 8), nor the need to cover the bottom line. Although our publisher still placed value on public expectations and opinions (e.g., he stated that he had the illustrator design a new cover for the Turkish edition and included blurbs to impress the readers), he did not take literary trends in consideration and valued personal taste over other considerations.

Van Es and Heilbron (2015, 302–3) revealed in their research that Dutch authors in foreign literary fields—especially in the periphery—were mostly framed either as typically Dutch (e.g., connecting to Dutch culture, Dutch landscape, or certain historical events such as the Second World War) or as cosmopolitan (i.e., written in a distinct European style, tackling the topic of immigration, or akin to English or American classics). From this viewpoint, the peritexts of *İstanbul'dan Bağdat'a* demonstrate opposing qualities: the substitution of Grunberg's portrait on the front cover with Middle Eastern people performing a traditional dance and the addition of the cities visited by Grunberg on the back cover connect the graphic novel with the local cultural and literary field, rather than emphasising typically Dutch or cosmopolitan themes. Furthermore, replacing Grunberg's and Kolk's biographies and photographs with blurbs from *De Groene Amsterdammer* and *Cultuurbewust* shifts the focus from the authors to the book itself. As clarified during the interviews, the Turkish publisher did so because he assumed Turkish readers would not be familiar with the author and illustrator; they were of little symbolic value to Turkish readers. Notwithstanding, the publisher acknowledged being intrigued by the cosmopolitan qualities of Grunberg's text—that is, its distinctive European style, characterised as being more philosophical, experimental, fantastical, and meta-fictional, and its treatment of the issues of immigration, the climate crisis, political matters (particularly related to Turkey and the Kurdish minority), and human rights.

In the end, our case showed that the Turkish publisher's main selection criterion was his own personal taste, and his main motivation was the prospect of symbolic gains in the form of making a provocative statement about a political question of relevance to agents and readers in the autonomous pole of the Turkish literary field. As such, it illustrated that activism through publishing translated literary works that touch upon relevant political issues can garner symbolic dividends. The analysis of the decision-making process behind the peritextual framing of the book, and particularly the front and back covers, suggested a localising strategy: Turkishness was foregrounded over Dutchness.

Whereas this chapter explored the production context in which *İstanbul'dan Bağdat'a* came about, as Bourdieu points out, any investigation of a certain literary field and its mechanisms must also consider the internal analysis of the literary product itself, alongside the text-external analysis (Bourdieu 1993, 34). Although it falls beyond the scope of this contribution, future research might compare the representations of Turks and Turkey in the Dutch original with those in the Turkish translation, analysing the strategies employed in translating and adapting these depictions for the Turkish audience, in connection with the present research and in light of research on the reception of translated literature.

## Notes

- 1 Apart from their preference for translated literary works from other peripheral literatures, Alef also seems to prefer translated titles that have not yet appeared in English. We identified six such novels in their list.
- 2 All quotes were translated by the author. Original text in Turkish: “*İstanbul'dan Bağdat'a*. [. . .] Kitap Türkiye'deki hegemonik ideolojiyle tamamen zıt bir yerde duruyor. Ve tabii ki, Türkiye'deki bu ayrıştırıcı, ayrımcı siyasi duruş en çok liberal entelektüelleri dışladı. Grunberg'in de durduğu yer çok eleştirel bir pozisyon. Günümüz dünyasını eleştiriyor. Orada da yine rahatsız etme tarzı vardı [. . .] 2015'te biz bu romanı başka yayınevlerine göstersek çok da beğenemeyebilirlerdi. Kitap tamamen karşıtlıklarla dolu. Grunberg Oryantalist damgası yemeyi de göze alıyor, adam sırf Türkiye'ye gitti diye otomatikman oryantalist oluyor. Bu ülkede okurlar ve eleştirilenler çok acımasız.”
- 3 Original text in Turkish: “Ve bizim okurlarımız da uluslararası siyasetle ya da göçmenlerle ilgilenmek istemiyor açıkçası. Onun yerine kendisini ilgilendirmeyecek, kendisine dair eleştirel gelmeyecek, mesela bir Kongo-Belçika ilişkisi içerisinde Türk-Kürt ilişkisin hatırlatmayacak bir metin arıyorlar.”
- 4 Original text in Turkish: “Hollandaca'dan en iyi edebi çeviri yapan.”
- 5 This was spoken directly in English during a conversation in Turkish.
- 6 Original text in Turkish: “aşık yüzlü.”
- 7 Original text in Turkish: “Ve burada tabii mesela Adana, Diyarbakır, Ankara. Bunların hepsi aslında başka şehirler. Kendi karakteri olan şehirler. Ama Türkiye'nin bu üniter devlet yapısından dolayı kentlerin arasındaki fark çok az konuşulur. Yani ciddi konuşmaların konusu değildir. Özellikle Kürtlerin de mesela bu kitabı alıp incelemelerini isterdim.”
- 8 Original text in Turkish: “Benim hakkımda bir şey söylüyorsanız bunu okumak zorunda değilim.”

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# 10 The Making of the German Translation of Louis Paul Boon's *Mieke Maaïke's obscene jeugd* and Its Last-Minute Retraction

*Anja van de Pol-Tegge*

The Belgian writer and artist Louis Paul Boon (1912–1979) is considered a major innovator of Dutch literature. Boon wanted to radically distance himself from the traditional Flemish novel, which he felt was too staid and inexpressive. On the one hand, he strove to thematise social reality; on the other, he saw an urgent need to modernise the style of writing and language (see [Muyres 1999](#), 48–51). In his work, he often adopts an unconventional perspective across several main characters or narrative strands. His linguistic style aims to reflect the language of the people and is peppered with numerous “Flemishisms,” expressions characteristic of the Dutch spoken in Flanders. While his social criticism and textual aesthetics met with mostly positive responses in the Netherlands from the outset, the first reviews of his work in his Flemish homeland were largely negative. The Catholic Church, in particular, rejected Boon’s writing due to its critical depictions of the church and its openly displayed sexuality. It was not until the 1960s that Boon’s experimental writing style came to be appreciated in Flemish literary circles. In Germany, the author’s work was introduced relatively late. While authors such as Hendrik Conscience, Felix Timmermans, Stijn Streuvels, Ernest Claes, and Gerard Walschap popularised traditional Flemish literature well beyond the middle of the twentieth century, Boon, like his colleague Hugo Claus, failed to make a real breakthrough in Germany despite repeated efforts ([Eickmans and Missinne 2014](#), 22).

Looking at Louis Paul Boon in German translation, it is striking that most of the books only appeared in German decades after the originals were published.<sup>1</sup> The 1953 novel *De Kapellekensbaan* (Chapel Road), now considered a milestone of Dutch literature, was Boon’s first work to appear in German, but it did so only in 1970 (*Eine Straße in Ter-Muren*, translated by Jürgen Hillner).<sup>2</sup> One reason for this may be that the post-war field of Flemish–German literary translation was still dominated by the German translator Georg Hermanowski, who rejected progressive authors like Boon ([Van Uffelen 1993](#), 420). In the wake of the 1968 movement,

however, the German translator Jürgen Hillner sought to change the predominantly provincial image of Dutch-language literature in the German-speaking world (Hillner 1968, 101).

It is also notable that Boon's work was published in German by several different publishing houses across both East and West Germany. Although the first German translation of Boon, published in West Germany in 1970, received positive reviews, it was not a commercial success. As a result, Hanser Verlag, a West German publisher, immediately decided against publishing any further titles by the author (Van Uffelen 1993, 441). In contrast, Boon's work—with its socialist themes—found a more receptive audience in East Germany. GDR publishers began to publish his writing, interpreting it as critical portrayal of the self-destructive nature of capitalist society (Van Uffelen 1993, 441).<sup>3</sup> While Boon's literary presence in West Germany waned in the 1970s, the continued interest in his work in the GDR kept his name alive in the German-speaking literary sphere. Later, Boon's work was taken up again by West German publishing houses, contributing to a renewed engagement with his oeuvre (Van Uffelen 1993, 441). Since the founding of the Nederlandse Taalunie (Dutch Language Union) in 1980, the translation of emerging Dutch-language authors into German in particular had been promoted and had generally been well received. As a result, the German public as a whole was considerably more open to modern Dutch-language literature. In this respect, the translation of Hugo Claus's masterpiece *Het verdriet van België* (The sorrow of Belgium) from 1983 (*Der Kummer von Flandern*, published in West Germany in 1985) in particular marks a milestone (van de Pol-Tegge 2020, 2). In the course of these developments, Louis Paul Boon's novel *De bende van Jan de Lichte* (The gang of Jan de Lichte) from 1961 was translated for the West German market (*Jan de Lichte und seine Bande*, 1987), and more translations of Boon's work followed.

Most of Boon's work was translated into German with the financial support of a literary organisation in the source context. This shows that the foundation of the Dutch Language Union in 1980 allowed Flanders and the Netherlands to increase the volume of Dutch–German literary translations significantly by instituting savvy marketing policies, for example, in the form of targeted subsidy measures (Heilbron and Sapiro 2018; McMartin 2019; Missinne 2018).

Furthermore, the German Boon editions often include a fore- or afterword by a scholar of Dutch studies. While Boon is very popular in the Dutch-speaking world, he still is comparatively unknown to readers in Germany. This is why peritexts were considered necessary for introducing the author to the German market. They provide additional information and establish a direct connection to the target context, thus already influencing the reception (Genette [1989] 2001, 10).

Overall, the particularities of the German Boon editions demonstrate that translation is an activity regulated by various actors (e.g., translators, publishing houses, literary funds, and literary scholars). To account for this, the sociology of translation has opened up a broad field of research (Wolf 2010). Agents in the source and target context shape the mediation process involved in the movement of literature across linguistic and cultural boundaries and serve as the key figures in literary history (D'hulst et al. 2014; Roig Sanz and Meylaerts 2018). Following this approach, this chapter examines how different actors impact the transfer of Boon's work into the German book market and analyses the factors that determine their practices. It does so on the basis of a case study of the German translation of Boon's 1972 novella *Mieke Maaïke's obscene jeugd* (2018 [1972]; Mieke Maaïke's obscene youth). The book, in which Boon uses the pornographic genre, quickly became a sales success after its publication in the Dutch-speaking world.<sup>4</sup> At the 2016 Frankfurt Book Fair, where Flanders and the Netherlands were the guests of honour for the second time since 1993, the Berlin-based Alexander Verlag had planned to introduce the novella to the German market. The publisher had produced a German edition, entitled *Die obszöne Jugend der Mieke Maaïke* (Boon 2016), translated by Ilja Braun and with an afterword by Kris Humbeek, but then decided to stop publication at the last minute. As a result, the work was not presented at the book fair after all, and the books that were ready for the German book trade were not delivered.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, I will outline why the publishing house first selected the book, focusing on the publishing programme and the publisher's preferences. Then, based on textual analysis, I will examine the creation of the German translation, discussing how the translator reinvented the novella's text for the German public and how the author of the afterword presented the book. Finally, I will trace why the publisher subsequently withdrew the publication by looking at cultural framework conditions in the target context. Since I consider these questions from a processual perspective, I concentrate on mediators and their practices in the different parts of the cultural transfer process, that is, in the processes of selection, translation, and subsequent reception (van de Pol-Tegge 2023b, 150). The *Mieke Maaïke* case shows that a cultural transfer process is not always completed and can be cancelled at any time.

### *Mieke Maaïke's obscene jeugd*: Content

The novella is a satire presented as the dissertation of a doctoral student in pornography, who interviews the protagonist, Mieke Maaïke, about her sexual experiences from the age of nine to eighteen. The story can be read as a purely pornographic work, but it also offers a subliminal critique

of society. It shows that while people pursue their new sexual freedom, they close their eyes to transgressions such as abuse or paedophilia. The Louis Paul Boon Centre of the University of Antwerp cites Boon's own explanation: "The author's intention in Mieke Maaïke was not to titillate the reader (if that did happen, it was mainly down to the reader himself) but rather to provide a parody of pornography. Mieke Maaïke herself ridicules all; the author does so as well"<sup>6</sup> (Louis Paul Booncentrum, n.d.).

In her essay "The Pornographic Imagination" (1967), Susan Sontag substantiates her view that pornographic texts can be serious literature and argues that the concept of literature should be expanded. She refers to the novels *Les 120 journées de Sodome ou L'École du libertinage* (1785; The 120 days of Sodom, or The school of libertinage) and *Justine* (1787) by the Marquis de Sade (compiled in de Sade 1990–1998), among other books, maintaining that they constitute an important point of reference for the intertextuality of the more recent pornographic literature they influenced. Indeed, Boon's posthumously published work *Eens op een mooie avond* (Once upon a beautiful evening), which is considered the preliminary version of *Mieke Maaïke's obscene jeugd*, is structurally similar to de Sade (Humbeek 2012). For example, the wealthy protagonists show strong parallels to the Libertines and seek to explore the true nature of man in a revealing way, freed from social constraints and restrictions. However, in contrast to de Sade, Boon rather makes a reference to the public world and denounces the existing power structures (Humbeek 2016, 121ff).

Throughout his oeuvre, Boon depicts sexuality as the driving force of human action. With numerous sexual images of women and girls, he also takes up his visual-arts theme of the *Phenomenal Feminathèque*—a collection of pin-up photos—which consistently presents the feminine as temptation (Missinne and Van Dam 2014, 253). Accordingly, in *Mieke Maaïke*, men act as libidinous beings with limited self-determination. Not only Mieke but also her girlfriends become victims of sexual violence. The themes of abuse and lust murder are also taken up by Boon, for example, in the 1958 novel *De paradijsvogel* (*Der Paradiesvogel*, 1993; The bird of paradise) with the person of Mr Wadman, who appears respectable to the outside world. Yet scholars have focused almost exclusively on the Lolita motif in Boon's work (van Bork 1977, 79). The actual theme of *Mieke Maaïke*, namely, sexual assault, has not been addressed to date.<sup>7</sup> The website of the Louis Paul Boon Centre (Louis Paul Booncentrum n.d.) also does not name this issue: "The erotic/pornographic work, in short, offers an unparalleled depiction of the modern person who, in search of the ultimate pleasure, exhausts all possibilities and impossibilities."<sup>8</sup>

Yet the introductory summary by Steivekleut, the doctoral student, already demonstrates what the book is about. The school doctor touches the genitals of Mieke and her friends, and the father of Mieke's friend

exposes himself and later has sexual intercourse with Mieke. It is implied that the man also abuses his own daughter. When she is twelve and thirteen, Mieke is severely sexually abused by her neighbour. An exhibitionist lures Mieke and another girl to his home and sexually assaults them. In these instances, the girls are often given alcohol to make them willing. There is a power imbalance, a relationship of dependence or trust between the child and the perpetrator.

However, the detailed and unsettling sex scenes convey a kind of sadistic pleasure in sexual assault, which overshadows the social criticism and calls into question the novella's literary significance. So, it may come as no surprise that *Mieke Maaik*e is primarily appreciated as a pornographic book in the Dutch-speaking world.<sup>9</sup> The novella can only be regarded as a minor, experimental work by Boon. Nevertheless, the book's sales success reveals that the reader is a voyeur, a fact that Boon may have anticipated. This seems to confirm the author's nihilistic world view and exposes men as libidinous beings. Moreover, the reception history of Boon's novella can serve as a critique of capitalism, as there seem to be few scruples in the book business about using pornographic scenes with a minor to generate revenue, since "sex sells."

### The publishing house and its selection decision

Alexander Verlag was founded by Alexander Wewerka in West Berlin in 1983 and is one of the few German publishing houses with a focus on theatre and film literature. The 1983 reissue of Peter Brook's influential theatre text *Der leere Raum* (The empty space, 1968) also established a signpost for what the publishing house sees as its hallmark: "theory imparted through practitioners' experience"<sup>10</sup> (Alexander Verlag n.d.-c). In 2019, Alexander Verlag got its seal of approval as an independent publishing house, receiving the Deutscher Verlagspreis (German Publisher Prize) from the Federal Ministry of Culture and the Media for its outstanding overall publishing activities (Deutscher Verlagspreis n.d.). In 2023, it was awarded the Kurt Wolff Prize.<sup>11</sup> In its decision, the jury stated that the publishing house had demonstrated "that literature on individual arts is not only of concern to experts, but can also have an impact on society, art policy and aesthetics"<sup>12</sup> (Kurt Wolff Stiftung n.d.).

In addition to its theatre and film book programme, the publishing house has repeatedly ventured into the literary realm, for instance, with Jörg Fauser, an author associated with countercultural literature, or Ross Thomas, a crime author who often exposed the American political establishment in his thrillers. Alexander Verlag reissued German translations of Boon's novels *Menuett* ([1955] 2011) and *Mein kleiner Krieg* ([1946]

2012).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the house has published translated literature by Jan Wolkers, one of the most important Dutch writers of the post-war period due to his proximity to American Beat literature.

Overall, Boon's conception of literature as an experimental space fits the programme of Alexander Verlag well. The numerous promotional events that the publisher organised for Boon also prove that Alexander Wewerka felt a special affinity for him. In 2011, for example, Wewerka himself presented the newly published translation of *Menuett* (Alexander Verlag n.d.-b). The renowned actor Martin Wuttke read several times from the novels, while Wewerka spoke about the fascination of Boon's texts and explained why they are still so relevant today (Literaturhaus Leipzig n.d.). The publishing house also cooperated closely with the academic world in promoting Boon. For example, literary scholars were repeatedly involved in book presentations (Alexander Verlag n.d.-a). This shows that the publisher aimed to promote Boon's texts for an intellectual audience in particular and was apparently successful in doing so: the novel *Menuett* reached third place on the SWR Bestenliste in January 2012 (SWR n.d.).<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it seems only logical that Alexander Verlag planned another publication from Boon's oeuvre. The Guest of Honour presentation at the 2016 Frankfurt Book Fair also provided an ideal setting. Moreover, the publisher could now build on Boon's own readership, which was already familiar with the author's seemingly non-literary style and his brutal realism.

The German translation of *Mieke Maaïke* was subsidised by the Flemish Literature Fund (Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren, now known as Flanders Literature [Literatuur Vlaanderen]). According to the grants manager in charge at the time, Wewerka was particularly fond of Boon's work and had himself approached Flanders Literature to secure a translation grant, since he was determined to publish the novella in German.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, the foundation financed sixty percent of the translation costs.<sup>16</sup> This subsidy cushioned the publisher's economic risk in introducing an experimental pornographic book to the German market.

When considering the German context in 2016, the question of whether there was general interest in the issues addressed in the novella provides arguments both for and against its publication. On the one hand, we may assume that the public was fundamentally interested in the topic of sexual transgressions due to more and more revelations about the extent of sexualised violence against children and young people.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, given this public discourse, the publisher also had to take into account the possibility that *Mieke Maaïke* might encounter fundamental problems of acceptance due to the detailed child pornographic depictions in the book.

## Translation

The newly emerging field of “Literary Translator Studies” (Kaindl 2021, 1) focuses on the translator as an essential human factor in the process of a literary transfer. This seems only logical, since the translator makes a foreign text accessible to a new audience according to his or her own translation decisions. As already mentioned in the introduction, the author of the epilogue and his practices also play a decisive role in guiding the reader and providing additional explanation for the main text. Therefore, the following sections will describe the creation of the translation product based on the German novella text and peritext.

### *Novella text*

Rosemarie Still<sup>18</sup> was initially supposed to translate *Mieke Maaïke’s obscene jeugd*.<sup>19</sup> Still had previously translated Jan Wolkers for Alexander Verlag, but she was not interested in the pornographic genre. So, the publisher commissioned Ilja Braun<sup>20</sup> with the translation. Braun’s background corresponded to the publisher’s programmatic orientation, and he also had experience in translating erotic texts.<sup>21</sup>

Braun maintains that neither the publisher nor the Flemish Literature Fund gave any instructions regarding the translation of the book.<sup>22</sup> The clearly pornographic text was not smoothed out and the sexual elements were not abbreviated; every detail was translated into German. The greatest challenge, according to Braun, was to find the right basic tone, that is, to depict linguistically the novella’s mixture of naivety and irony. He had read de Sade in preparation as well as the novel *Josefine Mutzenbacher*, in which a Viennese prostitute recounts sexual experiences in her childhood.<sup>23</sup> This informed the mood of his translation.

A distinguishing characteristic of *Mieke Maaïke* are its numerous puns, some of which lend the text a note of humorous irony, but also of the grotesque. In German, however, it is often difficult to find an equivalent way to express them. As Braun noted, “sometimes I come up with something good, sometimes not. The nice thing is that you can be flexible with a text like this: if a linguistic joke doesn’t work at one point but imposes itself at another, you take it with you, and then it balances itself out again in the overall economy [of the text].”<sup>24</sup>

For example, the use of *vagina* instead of *pagina*, the Dutch word for “page,” is a kind of running gag in the book: such as “vagina 69” (Boon 2018 [1972], 69), translated as “Seite sexundsechzig” (Boon 2016, 64) instead of *sechsendsechzig*. Moreover, Braun translates “Snee-witje” (snow white) (Boon 2018 [1972], 69) as “Schneewichsen” (Boon 2016, 64), vulgarising *Schneewittchen* by combining it with the verb *wichsen* (to wank).

The translation of “whisky-sofa” (Boon 2018 [1972], 55), the drink that Mieke’s neighbour pours for her to have his way with her on the sofa, poses no problem in German (Boon 2016, 35, 48). However, in the following passage, the ironic *playtime* is replaced by *Spaß* (fun), emphasising Mieke’s status as a sexual object:

Omdat het *playtime* voor me zou worden leerde hij me roken en drinken, soms kapte ik zoveel *whisky-sofa* naar binnen, dat ik wankelend van hier naar daar hotste en tegen de muur en een bloemenvaas omverliep. (Boon 2018 [1972], 55, emphasis added; Because it was going to be *playtime* for me, he taught me to smoke and drink. Sometimes I poured myself so much *whisky-sofa* that I staggered from here to there, crashing into the wall and knocking over a vase of flowers.)

Und damit ich auch sonst meinen *Spaß* hatte, brachte er mir Rauchen und Trinken bei. Manchmal kippte ich mir so viele *Whisky-Sofas* hinter die Binde, dass ich hin und her torkelte, gegen die Wand knallte und Blumenvasen umstieß.” (Boon 2016, 49, emphasis added; And to make sure I had *fun*, he taught me how to smoke and drink. Sometimes I would pour myself so many *whisky-sofas* that I would stagger back and forth, bang against the wall and knock over flower vases.)

Already at the very beginning of the book, Boon draws the reader’s attention to the obviousness of the abuse—symbolised by the *open raam* (open window)—with a play on words. Although the translation also highlights that Mieke’s environment ignores sexualised violence, it tones down the threat posed to the girl by the neighbour, who is not repeatedly recognised as the perpetrator in the German text:

Zelf is ze niet veel ouder als ze, in het huis van *buurman*, aan het raam van *buurman*, de ram van *buurman* naar binnen krijgt. [...] dat ze zoveel geneukt heeft aan open ramen. (Boon 2018 [1972], 20, emphasis added; She herself is not much older when, in the *neighbour’s* house, at the *neighbour’s* window, she gets the *neighbour’s* ram in. [...] that she has fucked so much at open windows.)

Mieke ist auch nicht viel älter, als sie im Haus des *Nachbarn* von diesem am Fenster gerammelt wird. [...] dass sie ständig an offenen Fenstern vögelt. (Boon 2016, 8, emphasis added; Mieke is not much older when she is rammed by the *neighbour* at the window of his house. [...] that she is constantly shagging at open windows.)

Mieke complains that her mother does not care enough about her and comments that problems do not get solved. While in the original Mieke

points out that she needs help and denounces her mother's neglect, the translation gives the impression that she approves of her mother's behaviour and is happy to have the extra space:

Maar problemen zijn er nu eenmaal om *niet opgelost* te worden, en dus bleef ze liever met de ene hand de blocnote volschrijven en met de andere hand de gulp van d'r baas wroeten. (Boon 2018 [1972], 42, emphasis added; But problems are simply there to be left *unsolved*, and so she preferred to keep filling up the notepad with one hand and cradling her boss's fly with the other.)

Aber Probleme sind schließlich dafür da, *gelöst* zu werden, also kritzelte sie mit der einen Hand ihren Block voll, während sie mit der anderen den Hosenstall ihres Chefs durchwühlte. (Boon 2016, 34, emphasis added; But after all, problems are there to be *solved*, so she scribbled in her notepad with one hand while she rummaged through her boss's fly with the other.)

Another consistent theme of the book, the sexualised violence that Mieke's friend Leentje suffers at the hands of her own father, is also less tangible in the translation. Leentje's father calls her *Muisje* (little mouse) throughout the text, a reference to *muis* (see, e.g., Boon 2018 [1972], 23, 41) as a term for vagina. In the German version, Leentje becomes *Mäuschen* (little mouse), but *muis* is translated as *Muschi* (fanny) (see, e.g., Boon 2016, 12, 32), thus no longer clarifying the connection for the reader.

It is also striking that from the beginning, the neutral *kontje* (bottom) of Mieke and her friends is consistently translated with vulgar language (a total of forty-seven times) as *Arsch* (ass), so that the girls are always presented pejoratively as sexual objects.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the translation suggests that Mieke plays an active role in sexual acts although she is portrayed as a passive participant in the original:

Af en toe [...] bracht ik voor de afwisseling bezoek aan Leentje, wier vader me als allereerste een stijve lul had laten bewonderen, en zelfs erop laten bijten had. (Boon 2018 [1972], 52; Occasionally [...] for a change, I visited Leentje, whose father had made me admire a stiff cock for the very first time, and even let me bite on it.)

Gelegentlich [...] besuchte ich zur Abwechslung Leentje, bei deren Vater ich zum allerersten Mal einen steifen Schwanz bewundert, ja sogar mit den Zähnen bearbeitet hatte. (Boon 2016, 45; Occasionally [...] I visited Leentje for a change, whose father's stiff cock I had admired for the very first time, even worked on with my teeth.)

From the very beginning of the novella, Boon makes it clear that he considers the adult men involved to bear the responsibility for what happened to Mieke, even as they justify their actions by portraying the girl as an alleged nymphomaniac. By alluding to Mieke's behaviour, the German translation further minimises the men's responsibility; *blootgeven* (to expose or reveal) is translated by *entblößen* (to strip or bare):

Het is mijn bedoeling Mieke Maaïke's obscene jeugd te bestuderen en niet mezelf *bloot te geven* [...]. (Boon 2018 [1972], 19, emphasis added; My intention is to study Mieke Maaïke's obscene childhood and not *reveal* myself [...].)

Hier geht es mir um Mieke Maaïkes obszöne Jugend, nicht darum, mich selbst zu *entblößen* [...]. (Boon 2016, 7f., emphasis added; This is about Mieke Maaïke's obscene youth, not about *bar-ing* myself [...].)

Overall, the German version reinforces the novella's pornographic nature and its depictions of sadistic lust. The translation takes up stereotyped views, like the Lolita motif, already used in the marketing of the original Dutch edition, and conveys Mieke primarily as the initiator of sexual acts. The abuse of the girls generally recedes into the background.

### *Afterword*

The afterword, also translated by Ilja Braun and entitled "Eine satirisch übersexualisierte *Éducation sentimentale*" (A satirically oversexualised *éducation sentimentale*) comprises 35 of the total 148 pages of the German edition. It highlights that the author of the afterword is an expert in the field by providing the following information: "Kris Humbeeck, a literary scholar at the University of Antwerp, is, among other things, the editor of the Louis Paul Boon Works Edition (Uitgeverij De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam/Antwerp), which will contain 24 volumes"<sup>26</sup> (Boon 2016, 148). The publisher Wewerka, who apparently had good contacts to the Flemish Boon community, had approached Humbeeck on his own initiative to request he write an afterword.<sup>27</sup>

In his afterword, intended as a reading guide, Humbeeck states that *Mieke Maaïke's obscene jeugd* is "much more than just a pornographic side work namely a satirical gem from the permissive seventies of the last century"<sup>28</sup> (Boon 2016, 111). It denounces the "erosion of norms because of increasing 'pornofication'"<sup>29</sup> (Boon 2016, 111). For the internet age, too, Humbeeck concludes, "Boon's parody has lost nothing of its relevance. If anything, it looks as if this mockery of late-modern moral dissolution has been granted a new literary life"<sup>30</sup> (Boon 2016, 111).

Obviously, the epilogue is intended to address a very specialised Boon audience, because Humbeek first devotes sixteen pages to details of Boon's posthumously published novel *Eens op een mooie avond*. This precursor to *Mieke Maaïke*, according to Humbeek, more clearly reflects the author's critical intentions against the background of the sexual revolution.

Only the second part of the afterword concerns the novella itself. Humbeek presents it to the reader as an *éducation sentimentale*, placing Louis Paul Boon on a par with Gustave Flaubert as the author of the modern novel. He argues that *Mieke Maaïke* can also be read as a *Bildungsroman* (Boon 2016, 130–31). However, it is worth noting that *Bildung* traditionally refers to the individual's development towards a higher, positive goal (see, for example, Jacobs 1983, 14). In Mieke's case, however, by beginning the story in a boarding school but recounting only sexual experiences, Boon makes it clear that these experiences deny Mieke a positive path in life.

Humbeek correctly states that "Mieke is easy prey for rutting gentlemen"<sup>31</sup> (Boon 2016, 131) and that "the sex scenes are strung together chronologically"<sup>32</sup> (Boon 2016, 135). But here, at the latest, the question arises why the epilogue still does not mention abuse or sexualised violence. Instead, Humbeek describes a turning point in Mieke's development, which he terms *Bildung*, namely when she begins "to take the helm away from the men"<sup>33</sup> (Boon 2016, 136). He claims that something "devilish"<sup>34</sup> has now entered Mieke, that she possesses a "destructive power"<sup>35</sup> (Boon 2016, 136), while the men are described as defenceless victims. Humbeek calls Mieke a "perfect theatre director"<sup>36</sup> and uses terms such as "army of women,"<sup>37</sup> "corporal,"<sup>38</sup> "battlefield,"<sup>39</sup> and "campaign to conquer men"<sup>40</sup> to characterise Mieke and her behaviour (Boon 2016, 140). Humbeek even calls the thirteen-year-old girl a "little sex goddess"<sup>41</sup> (Boon 2016, 138) or an "incarnation of the Holy Cunt"<sup>42</sup> (Boon 2016, 140), who drives men to perverted sexual acts. This justifies the men's behaviour and reverses perpetrator and victim. The literary scholar is unable to present a convincing case in his afterword that the work is a socio-critical satire.

### Subsequent reception in Germany

Alexander Verlag had organised extensive promotional measures for the German book edition. For example, the publisher had planned a presentation of *Die obszöne Jugend der Mieke Maaïke*, involving the literary scholar Jan Konst from the Free University of Berlin, at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October 2016 and had scheduled another Boon evening with a reading, including a video installation of the Fenomenale Feminateek, in November 2016 (Alexander Verlag, n.d.-c). Moreover, the website of the Delegation of Flanders in Germany had advertised the publication of the German edition and listed it as a recommended book. The site introduced

the author with high praise: “Louis Paul Boon (1912–1979) is one of the most important Flemish writers and is regarded as an innovator of Flemish prose. In the 1970s, he was considered for the Nobel Prize for Literature several times. Twice, he was awarded the Belgian State Prize and received the Constantijn Huygens Prize for his complete works” ([Flanders in Deutschland n.d.](#)).<sup>43</sup>

However, discursive developments in Germany led Alexander Verlag to reconsider its selection decision.<sup>44</sup> Depictions of children as “sexual objects” came to be seen critically ([Sager 2018](#)). There was a growing social awareness in Germany of sexualised violence and child pornography.<sup>45</sup> The increasingly critical social discourse in this regard prompted the publisher to seek additional legal opinions. According to Flanders Literature, Alexander Wewerka feared that he could be charged with child pornography. As a result, the publishing house reversed its selection decision and stopped the launch of *Mieke Maaïke* on the German market, arriving at this decision independently of Flanders Literature.<sup>46</sup>

In fact, a legal amendment passed in July 2021 significantly increased the penalties for the distribution, acquisition, and possession of child pornography (see section 184b of the [Strafgesetzbuch \[n.d.\]](#), Germany’s criminal code). The majority of these offences are now classified as crimes (*Verbrechen*) rather than misdemeanours (*Vergehen*). This concerns representations whose subject matter includes “a) sexual acts performed by, on or in the presence of a person under 14 years of age (child); b) the reproduction of a child in a state of full or partial undress in a provocatively sexual pose, or c) the sexually provocative reproduction of a child’s bare genitalia or bare buttocks”<sup>47</sup> ([Strafgesetzbuch, n.d.](#)). Such portrayals need not necessarily involve real people. Therefore, it is disputed whether a literary or artistic depiction of child pornography can lay claim to artistic freedom of article 5 of the German constitution ([Bundesministerium der Justiz, n.d.](#)). Rather than put it to the test, the publisher chose to abandon the translation.

## Conclusion

Mieke Maaïke’s mediation process reflects Flanders’ foreign cultural policy. Flanders’ substantial financial support for literary translations reduces the economic risk for publishers in their function as gatekeepers. This is particularly important for the introduction of non-mainstream literature like Boon’s work. Book fair presentations, too, support positive selection decisions as they offer an ideal frame for the market introduction of Dutch-language literature. Additionally, Flemish diplomacy supports these marketing measures with appropriate promotion. Dutch studies, too, plays a major role in marketing measures as reflected by Dutch literature scholars’

involvement in the peritext or book presentations. Furthermore, Flanders' foreign cultural policy pursues objectives of national self-promotion.<sup>48</sup> Both the afterword and the promotion on the [Flanders in Deutschland \(n.d.\)](#) website emphasise the progressive nature of Boon's writing. They present Boon as the author of the modernist novel and a Nobel Prize candidate, thus granting the controversial novella *Mieke Maaike* a special literary-historical status.

Overall, the case study underscores the extent to which translation is shaped by diverse actors and institutional forces, thereby contributing to—and further substantiating—the sociological approaches that have become increasing central in translation studies (Wolf 2010). However, the example of the failed launch of *Mieke Maaike* on the German market demonstrates that, in the context of a literary transfer, the cultural conditions of the target context can ultimately outweigh the practices of mediators. Although many agents—both in the source and target context (publishers, the Flemish Literature Fund, translators, literary scholars, and Flemish cultural diplomacy)—tried by all available means to publish the book in Germany, cultural framework conditions in the target context evidently prevented publication. This illustrates that publishers do not operate in discourse-free spaces. They need to align themselves with the epistemic configurations—that is, attitudes, expectations, and ideas prevalent in the target context—when selecting texts. In order for a process of cultural transfer to take place, the target culture must be prepared to open itself up and to integrate a certain foreign cultural element.<sup>49</sup> Social discourses in the target context ultimately determine the inclusion and exclusion of texts.<sup>50</sup> While the so-called sociological turn in translation studies is often discussed as a development following the cultural turn<sup>51</sup> (van Doorslaer and McMartin 2022, 2), it is more productive to view the two as closely intertwined rather than separate or successive. As Michaela Wolf (2010, 342) notes, “cultural and social practices—and consequently their theoretical and methodological conceptualization—cannot be regarded as detached from one another.” This case study reinforces what has become a well-integrated perspective in translation studies: the need to analyse literary transfer within the specific socio-historic context of the target culture (van de Pol-Tegge 2023b).

The case study also demonstrates that the translator and the author of the afterword have a social function as key figures in the mediation process. The translated text and its presentation via the peritext constitute the product that readers in the target context would be confronted with. The comparison of source and target text demonstrates how some translational decisions reinforce the pornographic effect. This makes the text even more problematic than it already is. In view of the social discursive developments, it can be assumed that even without this additional emphasis on

a sexualised presentation of the girl, publication of the text would be difficult to justify. In any case, a carefully formulated reading guide would be necessary for a socio-critical approach to the text. However, analysis of the peritext (afterword) reveals how depictions of violence against women are largely ignored or reinterpreted. Mieke is held responsible for the sexual acts in the book and portrayed as a danger to men. The issue of abuse would not be mediated to the reader in the target context by the translation product. We can therefore conclude that the German edition does not meet expectations in the receiving society with regard to sexualised violence against children and young people. This again justifies the decision not to publish this edition in the German market after all.

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### Notes

- 1 For an overview of Boon translations into German, consult the translation database maintained by Flanders Literature and the Dutch Foundation for Literature ([Nederlands Letterenfonds, n.d.](#)).
- 2 The novel was retranslated twice: *Ein Mädchen aus Ter-Muren* (Volk und Welt, 1986, translated by Hans Herrfurth) and *Der Kapellekensweg* (Luchterhand, 2002, translated by Gregor Seferens). For a comparison of the 1970 and 2002 translations, see [van de Pol-Tegge \(2023a, 144–177\)](#).
- 3 For example: *Menuett* (Aufbau Verlag, 1975, original: *Menuet*, 1955); *Die Jesses-Mädchen* (Volk und Welt, 1977, original: *De meisjes van Jesses*, 1975).
- 4 In 2018, the Dutch publishing house De Arbeiderspers published the book's twenty-third edition.
- 5 A copy of the German edition can be consulted at the library of Flanders Literature in Antwerp. The portal of the [Deutsche Nationalbibliothek \(n.d.; German National Library\)](#) includes the German edition with cover and complete bibliographical information, including 2016 as the year of publication, as a publisher's note, but lists it without holdings.
- 6 All translations of citations were made by the author. Original text in Dutch: "De bedoeling van de auteur was in *Mieke Maaïke* niet de lezer te prikkelen (als dat toch gebeurde dan lag dat in hoofdzaak aan de lezer zelf) maar wel om een parodie te leveren op pornografie. Mieke Maaïke zélf steekt met alles de draad [*sic*], de auteur ook."
- 7 In the Dutch-speaking world, too, discussions of the book generally played down the abuse. For example, the book's Dutch [Wikipedia \(n.d.\)](#) page states, "But although the gentlemen are paedophiles and love a little child, they are not heavily perverted paedophiles. They show her a lot; while there is exhibitionism, touching and urination they refuse to penetrate her until she has pubic hair, is thirteen, and sexually mature." (Original text in Dutch: "Maar hoewel de heren pedofelen zijn en van een kindwijfje houden, zijn ze geen

- zwaar perverse pedofielen. Ze laten haar veel zien, exhibitionisme, aanraken en plassen kan allemaal, maar ze weigeren haar te penetreren tot ze schaamhaar heeft, dertien is, en geslachtsrijp.”)
- 8 Original text in Dutch: “Het erotische/pornografische werk kortom toont ons op weergaloze wijze de moderne mens die, op zoek naar het ultieme genot, alle mogelijkheden en onmogelijkheden uitput.”
  - 9 The Amsterdam publishing house *De Arbeiderspers* (n.d.) promotes the book on its homepage as a “cheerful story about the precocious and sexually insatiable Mieke Maaïke.” (Original text in Dutch: “vrolijk verhaal over de vroegrijpe en seksueel onverzadigbare Mieke Maaïke.”)
  - 10 Original text in German: “Theorie aus Erfahrung der Praktiker:innen vermittelt.”
  - 11 The Kurt-Wolff-Stiftung is supported by the German Publishers and Booksellers Association (in German: Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels), the federal government, the Free State of Saxony, and the city of Leipzig.
  - 12 Original text in German: “dass Literatur zu einzelnen Künsten nicht nur die Fachwelt etwas angeht, sondern eingreifend sein kann, und zwar gesellschaftlich, kunstpölitisch und ästhetisch.”
  - 13 These are translations from 1977 and 1988, respectively, previously published by other publishers.
  - 14 Every month, the regional broadcaster Südwestrundfunk issues the SWR Bestenliste, which recommends ten books worth reading. The books are selected by a jury of thirty renowned literary critics.
  - 15 Email message from Flanders Literature representative to author, April 22, 2024.
  - 16 Email message from Flanders Literature representative to author, April 22, 2024.
  - 17 The German media addressed the topic of child abuse especially from January 28, 2010, onwards, following an article in the Berliner Morgenpost about incidents at the secondary school Canisius Kolleg in Berlin ([Anker and Behrendt 2010](#)).
  - 18 Rosemarie Still (1942–2022) was a German translator from Dutch. She was honoured with the Martinus Nijhoff Prize in 1984.
  - 19 Email message by Ilja Braun to author, August 26, 2023.
  - 20 Ilja Braun (born 1970) studied German, English, theatre, and film studies. Braun has been working as a freelance translator since 2005 and translates fiction and non-fiction from Dutch and English into German. His portfolio includes migration literature as well as thrillers, documentaries, and erotica. Braun has translated books by Fikry El Azzouzi, Stefan Brijs, Toine Heijmans, and other Dutch-language authors into German.
  - 21 See the following translations of erotica, for example: Ilse Nackaerts, *Küssen für Fortgeschrittene* (2008); Bonnie Gabriel, *Worte der Lust* (2006).
  - 22 Personal communication with Ilja Braun, email message to author, August 26, 2023.
  - 23 *Josefine Mutzenbacher oder Die Geschichte einer Wienerischen Dirne* is an erotic novel, first published anonymously in 1906 (Anon. 2021 [1906]), which is famous in the German-speaking world. As Mieke Maaïke, the book is structured in the format of a memoir and written in a parodic style.
  - 24 Original text in German: “Manchmal ist mir etwas Gutes eingefallen, manchmal auch nicht. Das Schöne ist, dass man mit so einem Text flexibel umgehen kann: Wenn ein Sprachwitz an einer Stelle nicht funktioniert, aber sich an einer

- anderen aufdrängt, nimmt man ihn mit, und dann gleicht sich das in der Gesamtwirtschaft wieder aus" (email message by Ilja Braun to author, August 26, 2023).
- 25 This translation phenomenon can also be observed in the first German translation of *De Kapellekensbaan* by Jürgen Hillner, published in 1970 (van de Pol-Tegge 2023a, 172).
  - 26 Original text in German: "Kris Humbeek, Literaturwissenschaftler an der Universität Antwerpen, ist u.a. Herausgeber der auf 24 Bände angelegten Louis-Paul-Boon-Werkausgabe (Uitgeverij De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam/Antwerpen)."
  - 27 Email message from Flanders Literature representative to author, April 22, 2024.
  - 28 Original text in German: "viel mehr ist als nur ein pornografisches Nebenwerk, nämlich eine satirische Perle aus den freizügigen siebziger Jahren des letzten Jahrhunderts."
  - 29 Original text in German: "Normenerosion durch zunehmende ‚Pornofizierung.‘"
  - 30 Original text in German: "Boons Parodie hat nichts an Relevanz verloren. Es sieht eher danach aus, als wäre dieser Spottschrift auf spätmoderne Sittenverwahrlosung ein neues literarisches Leben beschieden."
  - 31 Original text in German: "Mieke für brünstige Herren leichte Beute ist."
  - 32 Original text in German: "eine Sexszene chronologisch an die andere gereiht wird."
  - 33 Original text in German: "den Männern das Ruder aus der Hand zu nehmen."
  - 34 Original text in German: "Teuflisches."
  - 35 Original text in German: "zerstörerisch[e] Kraft."
  - 36 Original text in German: "perfekte Theaterregisseurin."
  - 37 Original text in German: "Armee der Frauen."
  - 38 Original text in German: "Korporalin."
  - 39 Original text in German: "Schlachtfeld."
  - 40 Original text in German: "Eroberungsfeldzug durch die Männerwelt."
  - 41 Original text in German: "kleine Sexgöttin."
  - 42 Original text in German: "Inkarnation der Heiligen Fotze."
  - 43 Original text in German: "Louis Paul Boon (1912–1979) ist einer der bedeutendsten flämischen Schriftsteller und gilt als Erneuerer der flämischen Prosa. In den siebziger Jahren war er mehrmals für den Literaturnobelpreis im Gespräch, außerdem wurden ihm zweimal der belgische Staatspreis verliehen sowie der Constantijn-Huygens-Preis für sein Gesamtwerk."
  - 44 According to Michel Foucault, ways of thinking, expectations, and interests of a cultural field of meaning are controlled by discourses, that is, by certain systems of conception, which are contingent and thus subject to historical change. Foucault (1974, 24) coined the term *episteme* to describe configurations of a cultural field of meaning and referred to it as the "historical apriori" of knowledge. The discourse is embedded in institutions, such as laws or the education system (Foucault 1974, 10).
  - 45 Increased public awareness is reflected, for example, in the activities of the German Nationaler Rat gegen sexuelle Gewalt an Kindern und Jugendlichen: Forum für den Dialog zwischen Verantwortungsträger\*innen aus Politik und Gesellschaft (n.d.; National Council Against Sexual Violence Against Children and Adolescents: Forum for dialogue between political and social leaders).
  - 46 Email message from representative of Flanders Literature to author, April 22, 2024.

- 47 Original text in German: “a) sexuelle Handlungen von, an oder vor einer Person unter vierzehn Jahren (Kind), b) die Wiedergabe eines ganz oder teilweise unbedeckten Kindes in aufreizend geschlechtsbetonter Körperhaltung oder c) die sexuell aufreizende Wiedergabe der unbedeckten Genitalien oder des unbedeckten Gesäßes eines Kindes.”
- 48 On the issue of nation branding and how literary translation mediates images of the Low Countries, see [Gentile \(2021\)](#) and [McMartin \(2021\)](#).
- 49 This result of the study is in line with cultural transfer research, which, since the mid-1980s, has focused on the dynamics of reception processes between cultural areas ([Espagne and Werner 1985](#)). In this view, the receiving culture with its specific needs is the starting point of any cultural transfer ([Middell 2016](#), 1–2).
- 50 See [Foucault \(1971, 11\)](#) for procedures of inclusion and exclusion.
- 51 For the cultural turn in translation studies, see [Bassnett and Lefevere \(1990\)](#).

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**Part III**

**Circulating Translations:  
Marketing and Reception**



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# 11 Marketing Translated Dutch Literature on Social Media

## The Case of the Serbian Publisher Booka

*Bojana Budimir*

Literary policy, defined as the strategic decisions and actions taken by governmental and cultural institutions to promote literature, plays a crucial role in the production, distribution, and reception of translated works. In a broader context, it can include awards or grants that either support or hinder translation efforts. This policy encompasses not only the strategies, tactics, and guiding principles behind translations but also the decisions made by various participants beyond the official setting, such as translators, interpreters, and publishers (Meylaerts 2011; see also the introduction to this volume). Within the context of translation studies, literary policy influences the flow of translations across the core–periphery spectrum, as outlined by Heilbron and Sapiro (2018). These policies can either reinforce existing linguistic hierarchies or challenge them by promoting translations from peripheral languages. For instance, support from institutions such as the Dutch Foundation for Literature (Nederlands Letterenfonds) and Flanders Literature (Literatuur Vlaanderen) has been instrumental in increasing the number of Dutch-language translations in peripheral markets like Serbia (Budimir 2020, 231). However, despite the notable increase in Dutch translations, these works often remain largely invisible in the Serbian market, garnering minimal attention from critics and journalists, with reviews in newspapers, journals, and literary magazines being particularly rare (Šumonja 2015, 177).

For translated works, one of the most crucial determinants of transnational visibility is the publisher, and particularly its editorial policies, promotional strategies, and position within the literary field. According to Sapiro (2017), “the symbolic capital of the publisher enhances the opportunity of a translated work to gain attention in the media and to attract the learned readership” (83). Moreover, the perception of books as high-risk purchases can be mitigated through effective publisher branding (Lis and Berz 2011). Developing and establishing a brand through careful selection of titles can help publishers gain the trust of their readers and, as a result, enhance the reception of their titles.

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It has been suggested that translated Dutch literary works are more commonly published by small-scale publishing houses (Sapiro 2016; van Es and Heilbron 2015). These publishers are often defined by limited financial resources, reliance on external funding, restricted access to booksellers and media outlets, and a resulting lack or absence of critical reception for their translated publications. Nevertheless, the advent of digitalisation has presented new opportunities for publishers to discover and select authors and titles worldwide, as well as to disseminate their publications. In particular, social media platforms have revolutionised the relationship between publishers and their audience, bridging the gap between the two groups. Through direct communication, readers can now engage with publishers and provide feedback by liking and commenting on their content. As a result, readers have gained an even greater influence on the publisher's decision-making process.

Although the impact of digitalisation and social media networks and platforms on the publishing industry has been examined from various perspectives (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Nolan and Dane 2018; Lis and Berz 2011; Lloyd 2008), their influence on the production of translated literature between peripheral languages has, to our knowledge, received limited scholarly attention. According to research on translation flows for Dutch literature worldwide, “a full 53 percent of literary transfers out of Dutch since 1998 can be classified as periphery-to-periphery transfer” (McMartin 2020, 153). The purpose of this chapter is, therefore, to investigate how the Serbian publisher Booka leverages symbolic capital and branding, combined with the growing influence of social media, in their promotional strategies to increase the visibility of Dutch and Flemish literature in Serbia.

## Data

This study explores the impact of the digital environment on the production sphere of a translated book, as outlined by McMartin and Gentile (2022). It focuses mainly on the publishers' strategies for mediating between the spheres of production and reception, that is, promotional practices related to presenting a translated book to readers in the receiving culture. To achieve this goal, we employed two methods of data collection. First, a semi-structured face-to-face interview was conducted with the founder and editor of the publishing house Booka. The interview, conducted in Serbian, took place at Bookastore in Belgrade in October 2020. Questions were grouped into topics related to the five processes a translated book undergoes: discovery, selection, acquisition, creation, and promotion. The interview covered the three Dutch novels in Serbian translation published by Booka: Tommy Wieringa's *Een mooie jonge vrouw*

(2014, *Lepa mlada žena*, translated by Ivana Šćepanović, 2018; A beautiful young wife), which had already been published in 2018; Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's *De avond is ongemak* (2018; *Teskoba večeri*, translated by Mila Vojinović, 2020; The discomfort of evening), which was still in the process of production at the time of the interview and was published in 2021; and Arnon Grunberg's *Tirza* (2006; translated by Mila Vojinović, 2022), which was still in the planning stages at the time of the interview and was published in 2022. The collected data provided insight into the publisher's selection criteria, their marketing strategies, and the role of social media in the promotion of their titles. In addition, we sent an open-ended online questionnaire to the translator Mila Vojinović to gain insight into the cooperation between the publisher and the translator.

Second, a content analysis was performed on Booka's website and Instagram account. We opted for Instagram because the content on their Facebook account was found to be almost identical, whereas user engagement was significantly lower. A total of three hundred posts from three randomly selected time periods (March 2019, May 2022, and March 2023) were analysed. To identify the publisher's promotional strategies, the content was classified according to the criteria proposed by Tafesse and Wien (2017, 9–10). Their framework categorises brand posts into twelve types. These include *emotional brand posts*, which are intended to evoke feelings by sharing inspiring stories and trivia; *functional brand posts*, which provide information about product specifications and technical features; and *educational brand posts*, which convey deeper knowledge or insights about the products and services. *Brand resonance posts* emphasise the brand's values and mission to create a deeper connection with the audience, while *experiential brand posts* showcase brand-related experiences or events. *Current events posts* utilise trending topics to stay relevant, and *personal brand posts* invoke personally meaningful themes and encourage consumers to share their opinions. *Employee brand posts* highlight employee contributions and expertise, and *brand community posts* encourage interaction and user-generated content. *Customer relationship posts* focus on customer service and address concerns or feedback, and *cause-related brand posts* show the brand's commitment to social responsibility. Lastly, *sales promotion posts* are designed to drive sales through special offers or discounts (Tafesse and Wien 2017, 10–19).

The social media promotion of the three Dutch titles published by Booka was also investigated by searching for hashtags that included (a) the original title of the book, (b) the title of the Serbian translation, (c) the name of the author, and (d) the phonetic transcription of the author's name.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, posts on Booka's Instagram account that referred to the three Dutch novels were manually searched and analysed. The collected posts were also classified based on the criteria proposed by Tafesse and

Wien (2017), allowing us to compare the strategies used for the Dutch books with the publisher's overall social media marketing strategies.

We also collected data on the number of likes and analysed the content of ninety-six comments under the posts on the publisher's page, as well as on the pages of the creators of the original content. The comments were analysed to assess users' reactions to the book and the review, specifically focusing on whether they were persuaded by the post to read the book, remained undecided, or were dissuaded from reading it. The analysis of social media content provided insights into how interactions between publishers, readers, and social media influencers can influence the transition of a translated book from the production phase to the reception phase and whether this interaction increases the visibility of the three translations from Dutch.

The following sections contain the results of our data analysis. First, we will provide a general profile of Booka, drawing on insights from the sociology of translation. This will enable us to reflect on Booka's position in the publishing field, which reflects their relative share of economic and symbolic power, their access to booksellers and media outlets, and the means available for promoting their books. These factors, in turn, affect the processes of book selection, acquisition, creation, production, and promotion of the Dutch titles, which will be presented subsequently. Finally, we will discuss whether and how the digital environment can compensate for limited financial resources and restricted access to traditional book distribution networks and media outlets. We will explore how digital platforms and tools can enhance the visibility of literature from peripheral languages and regions, particularly in the periphery.

### **Booka's position in the Serbian publishing field**

It has been argued that in the selection process, symbolic capital plays a central role for small-scale publishers, as opposed to their large-scale counterparts, who prioritise commercial success and profit (Sapiro 2008, 2016; van Es and Heilbron 2015; Vimr 2022). This distinction can be reflected in "the publishers' strategy and the list" (Sapiro 2008, 161). However, before exploring the specifics of Booka's profile, it should be emphasised that the vast majority of publishing houses in Serbia were established after the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and onwards, during a period characterised by the decentralisation of the economy and the privatisation of all industries. This suggests that publishers in Serbia had less time to accumulate symbolic capital compared to other countries with more established literary traditions, resulting in a significant reconfiguration of the Serbian publishing industry at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Booka was founded in 2009 in Belgrade by Ivan and Nika Bevc. The publishing house is a relative newcomer to the Serbian publishing field.

As a small, family-owned business, the company employs only three individuals: Ivan and Nika Bevc and managing editor Sanja Bogičević. Translators, designers, and proofreaders are hired on a contractual basis.

Based on the mission statement in the “About us” section of Booka’s website (Booka, n.d.), it is possible to determine that their primary goal is to disseminate and advance high-quality modern literature. The statement indicates that they are guided by aesthetic or intellectual criteria rather than the approval of the larger public. They describe themselves as a group of avid book enthusiasts who endeavour to facilitate their audience’s discovery of new “eye-opening and life-changing”<sup>2</sup> books and to provide them with “well-translated and beautifully designed books”<sup>3</sup> (Booka, n.d.). In the interview with Ivan Bevc, Booka’s founder and editor, Bevc emphasised the paramount importance of literary quality and editorial literary taste in the selection of titles: “We have a distinct literary taste and place great emphasis on quality by selecting books that are modern, somewhat atypical, and perhaps even unconventional.”<sup>4</sup> This editorial approach is typical of small-scale publishing houses.

Another significant indicator of a publisher’s editorial focus is their catalogue. While large-scale publishers’ catalogues predominantly feature well-known authors, commercial series, such as thrillers and romances, and a high proportion of translations from the hyper-central English language, small-scale publishers tend to discover new authors and exhibit greater linguistic diversity (Sapiro 2008, 161–162; 2016, 88).

According to the data available in the Union bibliographic/catalogue database (COBIB.SR, n.d.), which contains bibliographic records of all book and non-book material available in Serbian libraries, Booka published a total of 226 books between 2018 and 2022, of which 102 were new titles (the others being reprints). On average, they publish 21 new titles a year, roughly one-third of which are reprinted.<sup>5</sup>

Translated literature makes up a significant portion of Booka’s new title production, constituting 72% of their catalogue overall. French is the most common source language among the translated works, with twenty-five titles, followed by English with nineteen, Italian with fourteen, and German and Norwegian with seven titles each. The Booka catalogue is not limited to English and other central languages, as it also includes works by authors from peripheral languages such as Hebrew, Macedonian, Icelandic, and Dutch. This indicates a relatively high degree of linguistic diversity in Booka’s publications.

The publisher also played a significant role in introducing Serbian readers to a range of successful contemporary authors, including the Italian author Elena Ferrante, whose four-part Neapolitan Novels had great success internationally; the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård; and the controversial French writer Michel Houellebecq. Notably, these authors were

unknown to Serbian audiences prior to their introduction by the publisher, and Booka had a chance to sign them “because other publishers were not interested in buying the copyright”<sup>6</sup> (Bevc 2016).

Finally, it has been argued that the network of independent bookstores is crucial in supporting small-scale circulation. Research by Childress (2017) and Sapiro (2008) suggests that independent bookstores offer a platform for small publishers and help promote books that might otherwise be overlooked by larger retailers. In 2018, Booka opened its first bookstore in Belgrade, followed by two more in 2020 and 2021, a strategic move to address the lack of independent bookstores in the region. These bookstores also serve as a means of enhancing the publisher’s branding and fostering engagement with their readership.

### *Branding and marketing strategy on social networks*

For Booka, as for most publishers, promotion is a crucial activity. According to Bevc, “when a book is published, that’s the beginning of our work, not the end, like people tend to think. We put a lot of effort into the book, its promotion and visibility, and it seems to pay off in the end.”<sup>7</sup>

The analysis of Booka’s website revealed that book titles are presented with a short description containing catchphrases to attract potential readers, as well as information about the book, such as the translator, designer, and number of pages. The author’s biography and short excerpts from press reviews are included. Visitors are also provided with a preview of the first twenty pages of the book, which is an effective way of reducing consumer risk. Research on the influence of such previews on book sales has found that they positively affect the decision to purchase a book (Choi et al. 2019). However, not all small-scale publishers in Serbia use this promotional tool. Our analysis of Serbian small-scale publishers’ websites revealed that five out of eleven do not provide a preview.<sup>8</sup>

Booka was among the first publishing houses in Serbia to adopt a strategic approach of using social networks for book promotion. According to Bevc, this approach is the only financially viable option for small-scale publishers, who face greater financial risks when investing in translations from peripheral languages. Unlike their large-scale counterparts, small-scale publishers often have limited access to marketing support and less economic power in general. Additionally, culture sections in Serbian newspapers are currently scarce, and major media outlets are generally accessible only to large publishing houses.

Booka has successfully leveraged its early adoption of social media by establishing a brand identity as a publisher of contemporary literature that tackles provocative and compelling themes and by building an online community of more than 96,000 followers on Facebook and 45,000 on

Instagram. In addition, the publisher has cultivated partnerships with a network of book bloggers, bookstagrammers, and other influencers with whom they collaborate closely.

According to Bevc, the cooperation with book bloggers and bookstagrammers on social media is of great importance for the publisher's promotion strategy:

Through communication with book bloggers and younger readers on social media, we gain a lot. The promotion we get from them is great, and I can't thank them enough. [...] When they create specific posts, it gets noticed and shared so much that I think if you paid for it, you couldn't get that kind of exposure.<sup>9</sup>

This strategy is also confirmed by the analysis of the posts on Booka's Instagram. Nearly half of the posts in our sample (45%) belong to the category of brand community. This kind of post "seeks to drive active participation and engagement among existing members by acknowledging them (e.g., mentioning their name, tagging them in brand posts), or by using/soliciting their content" (Tafesse and Wien 2017, 17). This relationship is useful for both book bloggers who promote Booka's titles and the publisher who gives the bloggers visibility by sharing their posts.

In the sample of Booka's original posts, we identified the following categories: functional brand posts, experiential brand posts, current event posts, brand resonance posts, cause-related brand posts, and sales promotion posts. Most posts (55%) fall into the category of functional brand posts. These posts "represent a useful category to convey in-depth product information and help consumers to make informed purchase decisions" (Tafesse and Wien 2017, 11). They often feature images of their publications with quotes from the book, blurbs, short reviews, or author biographies and information about the prizes their authors received. They are mainly used to announce and promote new publications and focus on one author at a specific period.

Apart from that, their marketing strategy also includes current event posts (24%) and sales promotion posts (17%). Current event posts "focus on timely themes that capture active talking points among a given population, such as cultural events, holidays, anniversaries, and the weather/season" (Tafesse and Wien 2017, 15). One example is a post from Sunday, April 9, 2023, "Easy like Sunday morning." The goal of current event brand posts is to initiate timely conversations with consumers. Finally, a smaller share of posts belongs to the category of experiential posts (e.g., book clubs, author talks).

To conclude, Booka's social media marketing strategy goes beyond merely sharing information about their publications and promoting them.

It also focuses on building a relationship with their online community. This is achieved by sharing user-generated content, encouraging interaction, and participating in discussions with current event posts and experiential posts.

### **Booka's approach to the production of Dutch translations into Serbian**

In the following section, we will analyse the production process of the three Serbian translations from Dutch published by Booka. The texts discussed are *Lepa mlada žena* (2018), Ivana Šćepanović's translation of Tommy Wieringa's *Een mooie jonge vrouw* (2014), *Teskoba večeri* (2020), Mila Vojinović's translation of Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's *De avond is ongemak* (2018), and *Tirza* (2022), Mila Vojinović's translation of Arnon Grunberg's *Tirza* (2006).

#### *Discovery and selection*

During our interview with Bevc, two factors emerged as crucial in the discovery and selection of these titles: critical acclaim in the international context and personal literary taste. Bevc first discovered Tommy Wieringa via the Croatian translation<sup>10</sup> of his novel *Joe Speedboat* (2005; published in Croatian in 2010). After being impressed by the novel, Bevc explored Wieringa's other works and ultimately chose *Een mooie jonge vrouw* for publication, believing that it was better suited for introducing Wieringa to the Serbian market. Bevc's decision was influenced by a positive review of the book in *The Guardian*, which Bevc considers a reputable source of information about global literary trends, along with *The New York Times*. He also read the English translation of the novel, which allowed him to form his own opinion based on his personal reading experience. Finally, he noted the similarity in themes between Wieringa's book and the work of Michel Houellebecq, which forms an important part of Booka's catalogue. This similarity was another factor that contributed to Bevc's decision to publish *Een mooie jonge vrouw*.

*De avond is ongemak* by Marieke Lucas Rijneveld was also selected based on its international success. In 2020, the novel, translated into English by Michele Hutchison, won the prestigious International Booker Prize, attracting the attention of publishers worldwide. Bevc decided to purchase the rights after reading reviews and recommendations in the English press.

Lastly, Bevc noticed Grunberg along with several other Dutch writers such as Herman Koch who had gained international acclaim. He also read the Croatian translation of Grunberg's book *Tirza*, and it left a strong impression on him. He saw some similarities between *Tirza* and *Een mooie jonge vrouw* which may have also influenced the eventual decision to

publish the translation: “When I read *Tirza*, I drew a parallel between him and Tommy Wieringa. For example, the main characters of *Een mooie jonge vrouw* and *Tirza* are like some distant relatives.”<sup>11</sup>

One notable finding from the interviews is that the catalogues of the DFL do not appear to have played a significant role in the process of discovering and selecting books. When asked about the catalogues, he stated that “one can find a bit of everything there”<sup>12</sup> and that he relies on major national and international prizes, as well as reviews in Anglophone media outlets, when seeking out new authors to publish in translation:

For the smaller languages, you look at who the most prominent representatives are, who has received the biggest awards, who has received nominations, how much they have been translated into major world languages, and so on. When an author is translated into English, and published in America and England, you’re automatically able to get more information about that author.<sup>13</sup>

This supports the hypotheses of Heilbron (2000, 15–16) that “the communication between peripheral groups often passes via centre” and “that the decision to publish a translation of a book from a peripheral language still usually depends on the existence of a translation into a central language.” It can be argued that with digitalisation, the influence of the (hyper)central languages on the discovery and selection process is even greater, since influential media outlets in those languages are now easily accessible everywhere. As a result, the role of the translators and other experts and connoisseurs of peripheral literature in the discovery process can be less influential. A study on translation flows from Dutch into Serbian has shown that the impact of translators in the discovery and selection of titles from Dutch has diminished in the new millennium (Budimir 2020, 230). However, this case study also revealed the Serbian publisher’s language proficiency, and more specifically his proficiency in the closely related language of Croatian, to be an important factor at the discovery and selection stages: the Croatian translations played a crucial role in his discovery of Tommy Wieringa and Arnon Grunberg and their subsequent translation and publication in Serbian.

An additional noteworthy observation pertains to the role of financial support in the selection process. A study on the global circulation of Dutch literature in translation found that the “majority of book translations from Dutch are government-supported” (McMartin 2020, 154). Similarly, all three novels published by Booka received support from the DFL. Nevertheless, when asked if this funding plays a role in the selection, Bevc asserted that “while financial assistance is appreciated, it does not necessarily influence the decision to acquire a title.”<sup>14</sup> As he emphasised,

the objective is for readers to immediately recognise that a new publication from Booka is of high quality and not subject to compromise due to external funding sources. Thus, while acknowledging the potential influence of funding availability, it appears that in the case of these three Dutch titles, the selection process prioritised thematic and qualitative criteria.

### *Acquisition and creation*

Our research indicates that the DFL served as a notable source of information on foreign rights managers and translators for the three translations from Dutch published by Booka. According to Bevc, although publishers often encounter difficulties in identifying copyright owners for literature from peripheral languages, the DFL provided valuable assistance by sharing contact information of foreign rights managers and supplying necessary details on the titles of interest.

Locating a qualified translator often presents an additional challenge for Booka, as a substantial portion of their translations come from peripheral languages. In this matter, the DFL provided valuable assistance to the publisher by supplying a list of Dutch–Serbian translators. The translator for their initial Dutch publication, Tommy Wieringa’s *Een mooie jonge vrouw*, Ivana Šćepanović, was chosen from this list. *De avond is ongemak* and *Tirza* were translated by Mila Vojinović. These translations marked her first solo endeavours in the field. Unlike the first translator, Vojinović was recommended to the publisher by one of the most experienced and productive translators from Dutch, Jelica Novaković-Lopušina, who was unable to undertake the project herself.

Bevc stated that translators are granted autonomy in making decisions regarding solutions to translation problems and the publisher does not provide them with specific instructions. Additionally, translators work directly with proofreaders, who are required to send corrections and comments about the text to the translator for approval. This approach to translation has been supported by data collected from a questionnaire administered to the translator Mila Vojinović. However, the translator provided us with interesting insights into working with proofreaders. Vojinović has also collaborated with Laguna, the largest publishing house in Serbia. This partnership differed in terms of the publisher’s influence and their policy regarding the final translation. In the case of the two translations she did for Booka, Vojinović did not receive any instructions, and all her comments and changes were taken into consideration. However, according to Vojinović, she did receive instructions from Laguna, and the proofreader had a significant impact on the translation. She mentioned that “the collaboration with the proofreader from Laguna was completely different; some decisions were based on what Laguna’s readership is used to.”<sup>15</sup>

### *Promotion and marketing*

Since social networks serve as the primary promotional tools for Booka, the focus of this research was mainly on analysing the posts on their Instagram page. The analysis of the posts revealed a consistent pattern in the initial promotion of all the titles. The promotion starts with two posts announcing the upcoming publication of the book. However, *De avond is ongemak* deviates from this pattern, as its promotion began when the book was short-listed for the Booker Prize (a prize it eventually won). The following post for all three Dutch titles provided information about the arrival of the translated versions in bookstores. Over the following two weeks, periodic posts were published, featuring blurbs, information about the author, and short quotes from the books to build an awareness of their publications. This initial promotion is consistent with other Booka titles, meaning that the Dutch translations are treated similarly to translations from other languages, regardless of whether those languages are considered central or peripheral.

Regarding the categories of the posts, 55% of the posts pertaining to the three Dutch titles on Booka's Instagram page fall into the brand community category. These reposts of the content created by the readers and bookstagrammers predominantly consist of aesthetically appealing photographs showcasing the book covers, accompanied by reviews or short quotes from the books. It is worth highlighting that most of the reposts are found in the case of *De avond is ongemak*, with twenty-two out of thirty-three posts falling into this category. Conversely, a relatively equal proportion of original posts and reposts is observed for the other two titles.

When comparing the reposts of the three titles, notable differences emerge. First, a closer examination of the shared content reveals a significant majority of reposts for *Tirza* and *De avond is ongemak* as book reviews. In contrast, *Een mooie jonge vrouw* demonstrates a higher proportion of posts featuring solely the book cover image, occasionally accompanied by a brief sentence about or quotes from the book. This discrepancy can be attributed to the fact that Tommy Wieringa's novel was published in 2018, during the early days of Instagram. During this period, Instagram primarily served as a photo-sharing platform, and the emergence of bookstagrammers in Serbia was in its nascent phase. Many bookstagrammers who now provide reviews for Booka established their accounts after 2018. Moreover, an observation can be made regarding the distribution of reposts originating from bookstagrammers and influencers versus private accounts. Specifically, 91% of the reposts related to *Tirza* were generated by bookstagrammers, whereas this percentage decreases to 67% for *De avond is ongemak* and 60% for *Een mooie jonge vrouw*.

When examining user engagement, significant findings emerge. The analysis of user comments and likes indicates a slightly higher level of

engagement with shared content compared to content originally created by the publisher. However, the examination of engagement with posts related to *De avond is ongemak* reveals the presence of pre-publication hype surrounding the book. The initial posts by the publisher, announcing the title, garnered more likes compared to those announcing *Tirza* or *Een mooie jonge vrouw*. This can be attributed to the influence of the Booker Prize and the visibility it provided for this novel. In contrast, Grunberg and Wieringa were unknown to Serbian readers and had yet to establish their reputations.

Finally, another strategy applied to all three titles was the use of sales promotion posts. Wieringa's and Grunberg's novels were offered at a lower price in a sales campaign by the publishers one month after being published. Additionally, all three titles were featured in the lists of bestsellers and most-wanted titles, which Booka published periodically through its bookstore. In 2022, *Tirza* achieved third place among Booka's best-selling titles. The use of bestseller lists and sales and discount promotions are other strategies employed by the publisher to attract readers' attention and stimulate sales on Instagram.

The content analysis of Instagram posts reveals that the publisher, when promoting the three Dutch titles, emphasised their Dutch setting by using phrases such as "biggest Dutch writer of the twenty-first century,"<sup>16</sup> "the Netherlands' greatest literary star,"<sup>17</sup> or "literary wonder from Holland"<sup>18</sup> when referring to the author. In all three cases, the story is framed within a Dutch context, mentioning locations such as Amsterdam or the Dutch countryside. This approach differs from the promotion of other Dutch and Flemish titles in Serbia. Supporting this observation, another analysis of promotional materials for novels translated from Dutch into Serbian shows that in more than half of the analysed texts it is not apparent that the novel in question is Dutch or Flemish (Budimir 2023). However, from the promotional text, we can also conclude the focus of the publisher's strategy is on the economic aspect, clearly trying to boost sales by using words and phrases such as "masterpiece,"<sup>19</sup> "bestseller,"<sup>20</sup> or "greatest work of contemporary/European literature."<sup>21</sup>

The impact of the digital environment and social media branding is evident in the case of all three Dutch translations. Even though reviews and criticism of Dutch and Flemish literature in traditional media are still limited, we found a total of twenty-three book reviews for the three publications, with fourteen published as blogs and nine on online news portals and magazines. Most of the reviews (eleven) focus on Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's novel, while Wieringa's and Grunberg's books received six reviews each. Since this research primarily examines the role of publishers in mediating between the production and reception of translations from Dutch, the contextual analysis of the reviews is left for future research. However,

it is worth noting that in the case of *De avond is ongemak*, the influence of the Booker Prize on its reception is evident, as this information is mentioned in six of the eleven reviews. Interestingly, book bloggers placed less significance on this prize, since only two out of seven bloggers included this information in their reviews.

The analysis of user comments on the book reviews of the three Dutch translations posted on Instagram profiles of bookstagrammers reveals that 86% of the reactions to the reviews were positive. The highest proportion of positive reactions was found in response to the review of *Een mooie jonge vrouw* (100%), followed by *De avond is ongemak* (92%) and *Tirza* (78%). Approximately 45% of users indicated their intention to purchase or consider purchasing the book recommended by the bookstagrammer. A study looking into the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles found that social media influencers exert greater influence on purchasing behaviour compared to traditional celebrities (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017). The influence of social media personalities is also supported by the analysis of comments under the reviews of Booka's novels, which indicate that users perceive influencers as trustworthy and regard their literary preferences as credible. The persuasive role of influencers is exemplified by the following comment on a review of *De avond is ongemak* posted on the Instagram account @mynameissilvija on May 14, 2021: "It seemed to me that this discomfort wasn't for me, but you totally convinced me otherwise."<sup>22</sup>

Based on user comments, it can be also inferred that readers identify and appreciate the publisher's literary taste and preferences, and that this trust influences their decision to purchase their books. However, the publisher's specific and niche literary taste can also have, though in fewer instances, an off-putting effect, as evidenced by comments on the reviews of *Tirza* posted on the Instagram accounts of @booksandmagic on December 29, 2022, and @zozefinak on January 25, 2023:

I don't enjoy the titles that Booka publishes at all. I support them because they put out some "rarer" titles, but they just never leave a positive impression on me. I also never finished many of their novels.<sup>23</sup> (@irena.steva, January 4, 2023)

I thought this was another one of Booka's books that I managed to avoid (I'm a bit tired of the marketing pressure). I was doing just fine until *Tirza*. But when I read all these praises, I bought it.<sup>24</sup> (@mdurutovicmozetic, January 31, 2023)

In the second comment, we can also see that the publisher's marketing strategy can also have a negative effect but that the impact of the brand community can override this negative aspect.

Apart from the reviews, another indicator that Booka's social media campaigns impacted the reception of the books is the fact that since their publication, *De avond is ongemak* and *Tirza* have had two and three reprints, respectively. It is extremely rare for Dutch and Flemish books in Serbia to be reprinted, with this only occurring for four other books published between 2007 and 2024, according to data available in the Serbian bibliographic/catalogue database (COBISS.SR, n.d.). Additionally, three of Booka's titles can be found in over twenty-five public libraries in Serbia, while the median for other Dutch and Flemish titles is seven. Moreover, while 71% of all translations from Dutch published in Serbia are typically loaned at most twice from public libraries, these three books have been loaned an average of 174 times.

Finally, in 2024, Booka published a second novel by Arnon Grunberg, *De asielzoeker* (The asylum seeker), which could also be seen as an indicator of the success of his previous book. The publisher explicitly confirmed *Tirza*'s commercial success in an Instagram post on October 5, 2023, announcing that the book was going into its third reprint and therefore they had decided to publish another Grunberg title. The post, titled "What after *Tirza*?" invited followers to vote on the selection, illustrating the publisher's community-driven approach to editorial decisions.

## Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the pivotal role that publishers, particularly small-scale ones like Booka, play in mediating the production and reception of translated literature in peripheral languages. The Dutch–Serbian case study demonstrates that digital marketing, particularly through social media platforms and the active engagement of brand communities, can significantly enhance the visibility of literature from peripheral languages. This is especially crucial in contexts where traditional media outlets and literary critics often overlook such literature.

The success of Booka's promotion of Dutch titles in Serbia highlights the potential of digital platforms to overcome the limitations imposed by the peripheral status of both source and target languages. By leveraging social media, Booka not only increased the visibility of these works but also fostered a strong sense of community among readers, thereby driving both sales and reader engagement. This case study underscores the importance of marketing strategies and suggests that other small-scale publishers can adopt similar approaches to boost the visibility of their titles.

Moreover, the Dutch–Serbian case illustrates the complex interplay between literary policy, financial support, and marketing strategies. Success in the global market and international literary awards play a major role in the selection process, while assistance from the DFL was particularly

influential during the acquisition and creation stages. Nevertheless, it was the strategic use of digital tools and community engagement that ultimately ensured the success of these translations.

Future research should explore the application of these strategies in other contexts, involving both small- and large-scale publishers, to better understand the potential of digital marketing in promoting translated literature. Such research would contribute to the broader field of translation studies and offer practical insights for translation publishers navigating the challenges of marketing peripheral literature in the digital age.

## Notes

- 1 Foreign names are traditionally transcribed phonetically into Serbian using both Cyrillic and Latin scripts. Accordingly, Dutch author names were transcribed into both writing systems for this analysis. However, searches using Cyrillic transcriptions yielded no results on Instagram, presumably due to the platform's predominantly Latin script usage among Serbian users. Consequently, only Latin script transcriptions proved effective for the social media analysis.
- 2 All quote translations were made by the author. Original text in Serbian: "Što otvaraju oči, menjaju život."
- 3 Original text in Serbian: "Kvalitetno prevedenih, doteranih."
- 4 Original text in Serbian: "Mi imamo specifičan književni ukus i na prvo mesto stavljamo kvalitet tako što biramo knjige koje su moderne, koje su malo atipične, koje su možda malo i pomerene."
- 5 By comparison, Serbia's largest publisher, Laguna, has a yearly output of 350 new titles per year (Ciric 2023, n.p.), over sixteen times that of Booka.
- 6 Original text in Serbian: "Jer drugi izdavači nisu bili zainteresovani za kupovinu autorskih prava."
- 7 Original text in Serbian: "[. . .] da posao počinje tek kad je knjiga izašla, a ne da je gotov kao što ljudi imaju logiku. I onda se mi dosta potrudimo oko knjige i oko njene promocije, oko njene vidljivosti i to nam se ipak, čini mi se, isplati i vraća."
- 8 Eleven publishers were analysed. The publishers that do not provide a preview are Arhipelag, Darma Books, Karpos, Treći trg, and Zavet; the publishers that do provide a preview are Akademska knjiga, Blum, Booka, Clio, Dereta, and Heliks.
- 9 Original text in Serbian: "[. . .] mi kroz društvene mreže jako dobijamo kroz komunikaciju i sa recimo bukblagerima i sa mlađom čitalačkom publikom. I da nam u stvari prave tako lepu promociju, ne mogu da budem dovoljno zahvalan za to. [. . .] Jer oni kad naprave određene postove to bude tako primećeno i tako šerovano da mislim da ste platili ne biste to dobili."
- 10 Croatian and Serbian belong to the South Slavic language continuum and share high mutual intelligibility, allowing Serbian readers to read Croatian translations with ease.
- 11 Original text in Serbian: "Kad sam pročitao *Tirzu* ja sam zapravo povukao neku paralelu između njega i Tomija Viringe, recimo glavni junaci *Lepe mlade žene* i *Tirze* u stvari su kao da su neki rođaci."
- 12 Original text in Serbian: "Tu ima svega i svačega."

- 13 Original text in Serbian: "I tako kad gledate te neke manje jezike, gledate ko su predstavnici, ko su ljudi koji su dobijali najveće nagrade, koji su dobijali nominacije, koliko su prevedeni na veće svetske jezike i drugo. Imate taj momenat za autora koji je uspeo da se prevede na engleski, da izlazi u Americi, Engleskoj, automatski možete da dobijte više informacija o tom autoru."
- 14 Original text in Serbian: "Ona je dobrodošla pomoć, ali nikada na to ne računam jer ne želimo da nas opredeljuje kad biramo autorke i autore."
- 15 Original text in Serbian: "Saradnja sa lektorkom iz izdavačke kuće Laguna bila je sasvim drugačija, tu su neke odluke donošene na osnovu toga 'na šta je Lagunina čitalačka publika navika.'"
- 16 Original text in Serbian: "Najveći holandski pisac dvadeset i prvog veka."
- 17 Original text in Serbian: "Najveća zvezda holandske književnosti."
- 18 Original text in Serbian: "Holandsko književno čudo."
- 19 Original text in Serbian: "Remek-delo."
- 20 Original text in Serbian: "Bestseller."
- 21 Original text in Serbian: "Najveće delo savremene/evropske književnosti."
- 22 Original text in Serbian: "Sve mi se činilo da ova teskoba nije za mene ali ti si me potpuno razuverila."
- 23 Original text in Serbian: "Meni nikako ne prijaju naslovi koje objavljuje Booka. Podržavam ih, jer izbacuju neke 'redje' naslove, ali jednostavno nikada ne ostave pozitivan utisak na mene. Dosta njihovih romana sam takodje ostavila nedovrsene."
- 24 Original text in Serbian: "Mislila sam da je ovo još jedna Bookina knjiga koju sam uspela da zaobiđem (malo sam se umorila od marketinškog presinga). Sasvim dobro mi je išlo do Tirze. No, kad sam pročitala sve ove hvalospeve—kupila sam."

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## 12 “If You Want to Be Happy, Stop Being Scared”

Guus Kuijer’s *Het boek van alle dingen* in Russian

*Ekaterina Vekshina and Irina Michajlova*

Dutch children’s and young adult literature in Russian translation has been experiencing a boom in the last decade: according to the translation database of the Dutch Foundation for Literature, from 2013 to 2023 alone, 194 translations of Dutch literature were published in Russian, of which 117 were books for children and young adults. By comparison, in a period twice as long, from 1993 to 2012, 184 Dutch–Russian translations were published, of which only 38 were books for children and young adults. How to explain this expanding interest in Dutch literature in Russia? Answers can be gleaned by exploring the small but active field of translation publishers in Russia, their selection practices, and how the books were received by Russian readers. In this chapter, we explore the case of Samokat, a Moscow-based independent publisher of books for children founded in 2003 by Irina Balakhonova, and the lifecycle of a particularly pivotal book in its list, Guus Kuijer’s *Het boek van alle dingen* (The book of everything) (2004), published in Russian as *Книга всего вещей* (trans. Ekaterina Toritsyna) in 2013.

Contemporary approaches to researching the production and reception of (Dutch) literature can be roughly divided into two complementary approaches: qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative analysis is often used by researchers to describe the current situation and trends (Engelbrecht 2021; McMartin 2020; Missinne 2018). When more specific questions confront the researcher, qualitative analysis is used (Gentile 2021; Grave 2001; Koch 2008). There are both quantitative (Michajlova 2018) and qualitative studies about the transfer and reception of Dutch literature in Russia, e.g., about translations of the works of Theun de Vries (Kopylov and Michajlova 2018), Anne Frank’s *Het Achterhuis* (*The Diary of a Young Girl*, The annex) (Missinne and Michajlova 2019), and Multatuli’s *Max Havelaar* (Grave and Vekshina 2021). But what is remarkable is that all these qualitative studies focus on twentieth-century translations of well-known, often canonised texts. In this chapter, we shift focus to a translation that appeared in the twenty-first century, in a genre that has

received only very limited attention among researchers of Dutch–Russian literary transfer.

Guus Kuijer’s *Het boek van alle dingen* is an ideal case for several reasons: it was one of the first in a constellation of translated children’s literature published in Russia in the last ten years, and it has since been reprinted three times, which is quite rare. In addition, one can find dozens of reviews and testimonials on the internet, and all of this against the background of the virtually absent institutionalisation of literary criticism in today’s Russia (Mamedov n.d.) and the “crisis of literaturo-centrism,” which privileges Russian-language literature over translations (Fetisova 2009). We sought to explore the factors contributing to the success of this particular translation, which can be evaluated through objectively measurable indicators, including three sold-out print runs and consistently high reader ratings on online platforms such as <https://www.livelib.ru>. Furthermore, the book participates in a pivotal moment in the reception history of Dutch literature in Russia. Its publication marked the beginning of a significant increase in the number of Dutch children’s and young adult books translated into Russian, which has also seen an increase in the genre’s share of Dutch–Russian translations overall.

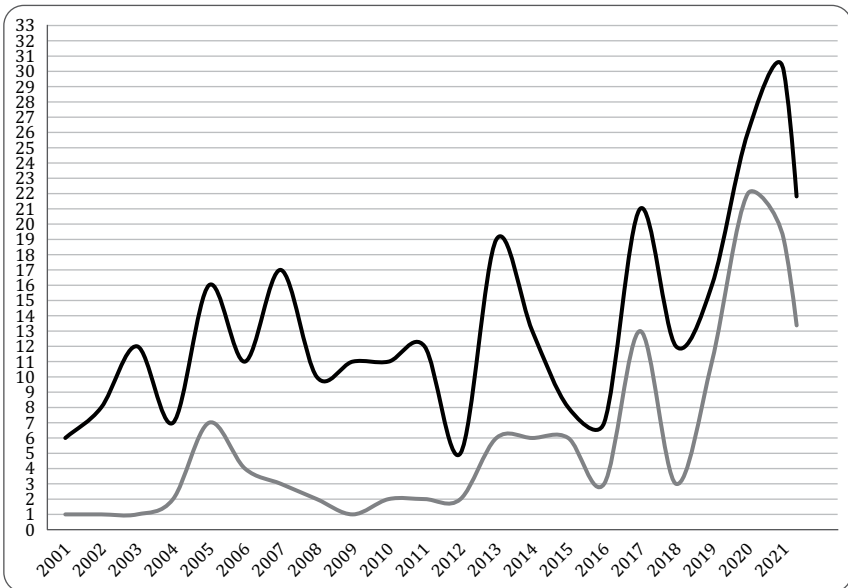


Figure 12.1 Translations from Dutch to Russian, 2000–2021 (children’s literature in light grey; all genres, including children’s literature, in dark grey). (Source: Dutch Foundation for Literature)

Our task is to explore the circumstances of the ‘making of’ *Книга всех секретов* in relation to its publisher’s emerging position in the Russian literary field and changing attitudes about children’s literature in Russia.

## Methodology

Our chosen methodology is the case study, a typical qualitative approach in the humanities and social sciences. A case study is “an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin 2003, 13). This study employs a cross-case analysis, addressing the challenge of identifying a compelling case that reflects the dynamics of children’s literature translation from Dutch to Russian. Considering the current surge in popularity of translated Dutch children’s literature in Russia, this issue warrants critical examination.

When developing a strategy for working with the material in the context of a case study, we chose an integrated approach that allows us to describe the research object from different angles. We worked with several types of sources, particularly (1) semi-structured interviews, according to the model shared by the research consortium behind this volume and reflecting the whole lifecycle of the book in five more or less discrete stages: discovery/selection, acquisition, creation, production, and reception. Four people were chosen as respondents, whose interviews would, from our point of view, reveal crucial information about these stages: the editor-in-chief (also the founder of the Russian publishing house), the person responsible for marketing, the translator, and the illustrator. In an effort to be objective and complete, we asked the respondents the same questions. We also collected and examined (2) documentation associated with the translation under study: reports of the Dutch Foundation for Literature (DFL; Nederlands Letterenfonds) from 2013 to 2021, as it was clear from the interviews that the DFL not only provided a translation grant for the book we analyse, but also supported broader activities related to the promotion of Dutch literature in Russia (see below). We also collected reviews of the book, which we compared to the discourse of the book’s producers, especially the person responsible for PR. Finally, we analysed the publisher’s website and YouTube channel. In consolidating these materials, we strove to capture the ‘lifecycle’ of the book in as complete a way as possible, that is “comprising all the relevant and critical evidence,” and “composed in an engaging manner”—elements that characterise any “good case study” (Susam-Sarajeva 2009, 56).

The structure of the article consists of sections reflecting the stages through which the book progressed: an analysis of the publishing house

Samokat and the publisher's motivations for selecting *Het boek van alle dingen* for inclusion in its list (discovery/selection); the factors that influenced the purchase of the translation rights and remuneration of the translator (acquisition); the process of translation and illustration (production); an analysis of the reviews of the book that appeared immediately after publication, its subsequent reprinting almost ten years later, its connection to the book festival circuit in Russia, and subsequent, second-wave reviews (reception). We also occasionally include anecdotal evidence provided by respondents, as such issues are of interest to researchers.<sup>1</sup>

### Samokat publishing house

Samokat is a Moscow-based independent publisher of books for children founded in 2003 by Irina Balakhonova and Tatiana Korner. As explained by Balakhonova, who now runs Samokat on her own,

I started Samokat together with Tatiana Korner. At the time, we both had young children—six and seven years old. And neither of us could bear browsing the children's books in the bookstore. Some were readable but hard to look at, that's how ugly the illustrations were; others were nicely illustrated but hardly readable. And there was no third option.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning, then, the publishers' motivations were shaped by both personal and economic considerations: they sought to publish books that would foster the development of their own children growing up in the modern world *and* fill a gap in the market. They were not interested in folktales (which are still widely read to Russian children) or Pushkin (understood to be the best Russian poet but born more than two centuries ago). They wanted books that would help guide and orient their children as they grew. Topics once considered 'difficult' and previously regarded as taboo—such as military, ethnic, family, and sexual violence, self-harm, discrimination, and bullying—appeared to be in high demand, particularly in the aftermath of the constrained and often hypocritical narratives characteristic of Soviet children's literature (Lekarevich 2020, 357).

You can tell yourself: I live in a society with lots of problems. Difficult problems. And it isn't very clear how we should solve them. The publishing house is an instrument for formulating these problems and making them visible.<sup>3</sup>

This focus on addressing societal problems through literature was paired with a desire to serve a specific group of readers:

You can do what you find interesting and what you find important, and you can be successful in it. You just don’t let yourself be guided by mass-media demands, but rather by the needs of a specific readership.<sup>4</sup>

Balakhonova observes a significant lack of investment in high-quality children’s and young adult literature in Russia at the turn of the twenty-first century. In response, Samokat adopted a mission to encourage innovative and ambitious Russian authors to produce works in this genre, complementing these efforts by incorporating translations of books authored by contemporary international writers.

By 2013, Samokat had grown into an established publisher with a clearly formulated mission:

To build bridges between cultures and generations with the help of books, [and] to create a space for reflection and communication between parents and children. We publish books for those who want to talk about important topics honestly, sincerely and interestingly—for children, youth, and adults.<sup>5</sup> (Samokat, n.d.-b)

Many Russian readers know Samokat as a daring and open-minded publisher committed to its readers, and many of the reader reviews that appeared about *Книга всех вещей* (discussed in more detail below) begin with some variation of “I bought this book because it was published by Samokat.” The publisher employs nine full-time employees and is known for its commitment to publishing pedagogically sound, socially engaged, and artistically elevated books. As of September 2024, the current catalogue includes some 400 titles and 400 authors, with more or less equal shares of translated works by international authors and non-translated works by Russian authors. Among its list are also books linked to specific organisations that publish via Samokat, such as the Gulag History Museum, a museum dedicated to preserving the history of the Stalin work camps, a topic that remains extremely painful (and therefore significant) for Russians. The list of Samokat translators counts 131 names, including five translators working from Dutch. That may seem to suggest a rather limited place for Dutch children’s literature in Samokat’s list, but a closer look at the share of translations from Dutch actually demonstrates an outsized share: of the 451 titles translated from twenty-three languages, 36 titles are from Dutch which puts it in fifth place after French (104 titles),

English (76), German (47) and Swedish (39). Dutch literature turns out to be more popular at Samokat than for instance Spanish (22), Italian (13), Polish (13), Portuguese (9) or Chinese (3).<sup>6</sup> Why?

An answer was formulated by Samokat itself in its invitation announcing the “Festival of Bold Books from the Netherlands and Flanders (2020–2021)”:

Honest, deep, life-affirming, and surprisingly beautiful, these books—let’s call them bold—tackle very important topics for children and teenagers. [...] There are no ‘difficult’ topics for Dutch authors writing for children. “We are all in this life together, regardless of age,” they say. Courage and sanity, which we sometimes lack, are inherent not only in the Dutch and Flemish writers for children but also in their works. And thanks to the thoughtful and constant support of the [Dutch and Flemish] government, the real-world phenomenon of Dutch children’s literature is unfolding before our eyes!<sup>7</sup>

This festival is the only event Samokat has organised to single out the authors and works of a specific source language. No other languages, including those best represented in the list, such as English or Spanish, have been highlighted in this way. As we will show, this special attention for Dutch children’s literature can be traced back to the overwhelming success of *Книга всех вещей*, published by Samokat in 2013. Previously, in 2010, Samokat had published *Piep!*, by the noted Dutch children’s book author and illustrator Joke van Leeuwen. That book found readers and met the publisher’s expectations, but it lacked the timeliness of *Het boek van alle dingen*.

### The timeliness of *Книга всех вещей* in the Russia of 2013

Explaining the entry of *Книга всех вещей* on the Russian book market requires us to first examine the book’s plot. The summary printed on the back cover of the Dutch original reads:

Every day, Thomas is read to from the Bible. He knows many parts by heart already, which he recounts in his own funny and creative way, a habit his father doesn’t much care for. When his zealot father turns to violence to bring his mother to the true faith, Thomas decides it is time for an Egyptian plague. [...]<sup>8</sup>

The central themes of the book are thus religious fanaticism and domestic violence, or rather, their intersection. In the beginning of the book, nine-year-old Thomas is just as scared of his despotic father as his mother and

sister are. But gradually he begins to realise, with support from the elderly widow next door (a member of the Dutch Resistance during the Second World War), that he needs to do something. One day, after having listened to his father reciting the story from the Bible of the first plague of Egypt (water turning to blood), he surreptitiously pours a bottle of fruit juice in his fish tank, turning it red. His goal is to scare his father into realising that his heavy hand is just as bad as the pharaoh's. This marks a first step in Thomas's resistance, and step by step his mother and sister follow Thomas's example, eventually freeing themselves from the oppressive household.

Thomas is no ordinary boy: he sees things that other people cannot see, chats with a certain Mr. Jesus who drops by occasionally, and falls in love with the beautiful Eliza, who has a prosthetic leg and a hand with just a pinkie. His conversations with Jesus are especially peculiar and humorous, chats between two friends. Jesus appears as a hippie that prefers to stay out of other people's business and is prone to talk about his troubled relationship with his father. Because the story is told through the eyes of Thomas, the reader experiences the book as imaginative, poetic, moving, and quite funny.

The book met with immediate acclaim in the Netherlands, winning both the Gouden Griffel (for the best children's book written in Dutch) and the Gouden Uil (its Flemish counterpart) in 2005. In interviews, Guus Kuijer explains that *Het boek van alle dingen* was both his most autobiographical book and the most painful to write. Several scenes of domestic violence, such as when Thomas is beaten by his father with a wooden spoon, were drawn directly from his life experience. The Netherlands outlawed corporeal punishment in the household in 2007. By then, Kuijer had long been an adult.

Russia, however, still has no such law, despite the fact that domestic violence is commonplace and a major societal problem. Draft legislation has existed since 2016 but has not been approved. Effectively, domestic violence is decriminalised in Russia. It is for this reason that *Het boek van alle dingen* was and remains of great societal import to the Russian context, a realisation not lost on its Russian publisher. Moreover, the book's anti-despot message strongly resonated with Russian readers in 2013, a period marked by a widespread desire to believe in the possibility of overthrowing tyranny through collective action. This emancipatory ethos is prominently reflected in the reviews from that time.

### Three key institutional factors

To gain a more complete understanding of how and why Kuijer's book found its way to Russian readers, we must also situate it within the Russian literary field, to use Bourdieu's (2000) concept. Bourdieu demonstrates

that a book's reception is not simply explained by adherence to certain aesthetic criteria or factors like timeliness or chance, but rather is (primarily) the result of a social process involving mutual interactions between various agents (individuals and institutions) conditioned by (unequal) power relations in the literary field (see [van Boven 1996](#)). Four institutions in particular have been decisive for bring Dutch children's literature to Russian readers: small, socially engaged independent publishers of which Samokat is a good example, the Dutch Foundation for Literature and its counterpart Flanders Literature, and book fairs, in this case the Bologna Children's Book Fair and the Non/Fiction Book Fair held in Moscow. We zero in on three particularly pivotal events, linked to these institutions, in order to explain the exceptional trajectory of *Het boek van alle dingen* in Russia.

#### *2012: De Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award for Guus Kuijer*

In March 2012, several representatives from Samokat, including its publisher Irina Balakhonova, took part in the Bologna Children's Book Fair, the largest and most important trade fair specialised in the genre. Among the roster of meetings Balakhonova had arranged was one with Agnes Vogt, the grant manager for children's and young adult literature at the Dutch Foundation for Literature. The meeting went particularly well: Balakhonova and Vogt got on very well and shared a sense of mutual respect for one another's professionalism.

In the course of the fair, it was announced that Guus Kuijer had been awarded the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (ALMA) for that year, a development greeted with great excitement by the Dutch delegation, including Agnes Vogt. That excitement was shared by Irina Balakhonova, who had had such a positive exchange with Vogt earlier in the fair and now could approach her for more information about Kuijer. Additionally, Kuijer was physically present in Bologna and he made a strong impression on Balakhonova and her colleagues.

According to Olga Patrusheva, Samokat's public relations manager, Balakhonova had already read *Het boek van alle dingen* in its French translation, together with her son, who attended a French-speaking school. In any case, her experience at the Bologna Children's Book Fair convinced Balakhonova to secure the Russian translation rights for Kuijer's book for Samokat and to bring it to market as quickly as possible.

#### *2013: The bilateral Netherlands-Russia Year*

A second consequential event at the institutional level was the Netherlands-Russia Year 2013 (Nederland-Ruslandjaar), a bilateral programme of events

meant to stimulate friendly relations between the two countries. However, as the year progressed and criticism from Dutch civil society increased, the ‘year of friendship’ at times turned into a ‘year of animosity.’ But in the initiative’s early months, both countries saw it as “a good opportunity to intensify bilateral relations, both on an official level and between companies, cultural institutions and non-governmental organisations,” (Netherlands, Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal 2012) in the words of the Dutch government.<sup>9</sup>

One of the events organised as part of the effort involved inviting a large delegation of Dutch authors to the Non/Fiction Book Fair, Russia’s most important book fair, held in November 2013 in Moscow. The delegation was co-financed by both partners and had the explicit purpose of showcasing Dutch authors to Russian publishers and readers.

This year, as you know, is the year of friendship between Russia and the Netherlands. The Netherlands is a special guest at NF [Non/Fiction]. Children’s literature, fiction and scientific literature will be featured there. Additionally, a record number of books by Dutch authors were published this year. Six leading Dutch writers are coming to Moscow to meet their readers.<sup>10</sup> (Комсомольская правда [Komsomol truth] 2013)

The delegation’s visit was described in the yearly report of the Dutch Foundation for Literature for 2013 as follows:

7–10 July, Moscow, Russia, among other activities, visits with publishers in preparation of the guest of honour presentation of the Netherlands at the Non/Fiction Book Fair.

20–24 September, Kolomna and Moscow, Russia, among other activities, visits with publishers in preparation of the guest of honour presentation of the Netherlands at the Non/Fiction Book Fair.

**Stands at book fairs:**

27 November–1 December, Non/Fiction Book Fair in Moscow (Russia), an international book fair for fiction and non-fiction. [...]

**Literary programmes abroad:**

27 November–1 December, Netherlands guest of honour presentation at the Non/Fiction Book Fair in Moscow. Manifestation in the framework of the Netherlands-Russia Year of Friendship, in cooperation with six Dutch authors: Geert Mak, Dick Swaab, Herman Koch, Sjeng Scheijen, Guus Kuijer and Loes Riphagen. Events were held at the fair itself as well as in schools, libraries and bookstores. [...]

**Reach:**

Number of events: 11. Number of attendees: approximately 500.  
 Number of visitors at the Dutch stand: 2,000.<sup>11</sup> ([Nederlands Letterenfonds \[Dutch Foundation for Literature\] 2013](#), n.p.)

*2013: Samokat celebrates ten-year anniversary*

A third factor at the institutional level was less ‘global’ than the previous two but nonetheless important: in 2013, Samokat marked the ten-year anniversary of its founding. In celebrating this, the publisher took it upon itself to formulate its social mission in clear and concise terms, foregrounding the democratic values of independence, freedom, and truth. To do so, it selected a quote from *Het boek van alle dingen*: “If you want to be happy, stop being scared.” This contributed to the popularisation of Kuijer’s book in Russia. It seems safe to assume that, as naïve as it may appear in hindsight, in 2013 many readers embraced and found hope in this message of democratisation.

**Producing *Книга всех вещей***

When Irina Balakhonova and her colleagues made their acquaintance with Guus Kuijer and his *Boek van alle dingen* at the Bologna Book Fair, Balakhonova called me (Irina Michajlova) immediately to ask if I would be willing to take on the translation. As she spoke, I heard the buzz of voices in the background: she was calling from the book fair floor. I immediately accepted the translation and promised to deliver the best translation I could manage. Because I was working on another project at the time, I eventually contacted a former student, Ekaterina Toritsyna, who was a regular and active participant in our bi-monthly translation workshops at the Dutch Institute in St Petersburg (NIP) if she would be interested in the assignment. The translations she had produced for the translation workshops and the nuanced viewpoints she expressed about her translation practice made clear to me that she would be an excellent fit for the job. This decision was driven not by personal sympathy for Ekaterina Toritsyna, but rather by an appreciation of her professional skills and a commitment to rectifying an injustice. In 2012, a translation workshop for novice translators was held in Antwerp, during which I served both as a jury member and an instructor. Although Toritsyna’s application was rejected, I later learned from a fellow evaluator that the translation submitted with her application had been ranked as the second best. A misunderstanding had occurred, resulting in her exclusion from the seminar. To address this oversight, I sought to provide her with an opportunity to demonstrate her abilities by entrusting her with the translation of *Het boek van alle dingen*.

When I recommended Ekaterina Toritsyna to Balakhonova, she trusted my judgement and offered Toritsyna the translation project. Furthermore, Balakhonova's strong relationship with the Dutch Foundation for Literature and her familiarity with its procedures allowed her to identify an opportunity for Toritsyna to submit a sample translation. A positive evaluation of this sample would secure Toritsyna's inclusion on the foundation's list of accredited translators, thereby enabling Balakhonova to apply for a translation grant. With the translator selected and the transaction for the translation rights finalised, the production of the translation was poised to begin.

### *Making the translation*

Ekaterina Toritsyna knew Samokat publishing house well and was pleased to have the opportunity to translate a book for its list. At that moment, she was working as a freelance interpreter and translator, teaching Dutch at St Petersburg University, and raising three children.

By 2012, Toritsyna had contributed as one of six translators for *De doodskunstenaar* (Death defied) by Luuc Kooijmans and had also translated several articles for *De Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur* (The history of Dutch literature), as well as a play. However, she could not yet be classified as an experienced translator, and her accreditation by the Dutch Foundation for Literature remained contingent upon the positive evaluation of her translation sample. As the Dutch Foundation for Literature finances only translations made by accredited translators, and Balakhonova had a strong interest in securing a translation grant, Toritsyna's accreditation was imperative to the success of the project. Balakhonova submitted Toritsyna's sample translation to the Dutch Foundation for Literature for evaluation on her behalf. The evaluators were enthusiastic about her work and wrote very positive reviews of the sample. Ekaterina Toritsyna was added to the list of accredited translators, and Samokat was granted a subsidy of 1,040 euros for the translation costs.

The translation work itself lasted approximately a year, according to the translator. She was given no instructions by the publisher and was free to translate the book as she saw fit. When the translation was ready, she discussed the Russian text with Evgenia Novikova, whom she found a very careful and attentive editor. Their cooperation was productive: they discussed details flagged by Toritsyna, sought out translation solutions together, opted to retain as much realia as possible and together came to a very readable Russian text. The translator recounted to us that her experience reading books aloud to her children also helped her in this respect. She also mentioned facing some formidable translation dilemmas. For instance, she found it very difficult to translate a poem by Annie M. G. Schmidt that was included in the book, which slowed down her

translation process. In the end, the publisher contacted a well-known poet and translator, Dina Krupskaya, who made the translation of the poem based on Toritsyna's interlinear translation. Ekaterina did not have contact with Guus Kuijer while drafting her translation, meeting him only in 2013 during his visit to Moscow, where she acted as his interpreter.

*Книга всех вещей* played an important role in Ekaterina Toritsyna's career as a translator, functioning as her calling card. The people involved in the publication—the publisher, the editor, the PR manager, the illustrator—knew Ekaterina to be a good translator and did not hesitate to recommend her to other publishers looking for a Dutch–Russian translator. The fact that Ekaterina Toritsyna achieved accreditation by the Dutch Foundation for Literature also played a role: every publisher knows that they can expect to receive a translation grant if they work with an accredited translator. However, no less important is the fact that the book brought Ekaterina into contact with literature of the highest calibre at a formative moment in her career, leading to a steady stream of subsequent literary translation work. Today she is one of the most sought-after Dutch–Russian translators and has been involved in many translation projects. Since the publication of *Книга всех вещей*, she has gone on to translate four more books for Samokat and twenty-three books in total (as of 2022) for eight different publishers. In addition, her translation experience has enriched her teaching in the Dutch Studies programme at St Petersburg University.

### *Illustrations*

The illustrations for *Книга всех вещей* were made by the young, newly graduated illustrator Olga Serdyukova. She came to the project at the invitation of her former instructor and advisor, the well-known illustrator Viktor Melamed, who was also the art director at Samokat. Melamed was impressed by Serdyukova's final project, a comic strip about the hostility of the urban environment for people with limited mobility, whose ailments were presented in the form of 'phantasmogorical creatures' alluding to class distinctions and societal prejudices. She sought to talk about their problems "in an interesting and less pathological way." Her style was inspired by the works of two artists: Stefano Ricci and especially his wife, Anke Freuchtenberger: black and white, with elements of surrealism, like nightmares. Serdyukova described her style as "cute and creepy," using a graphic language that was "half childish, half nightmarish."<sup>12</sup>

Melamed felt that Serdyukova's style matched his artistic vision for the book very well, and after asking her to provide test illustrations of the protagonists, she was hired for the job. The only instructions she was given was to make the illustrations black and white, a constraint that suited her style very well. Her illustrations were finished within a month; her cover design took an additional three weeks.

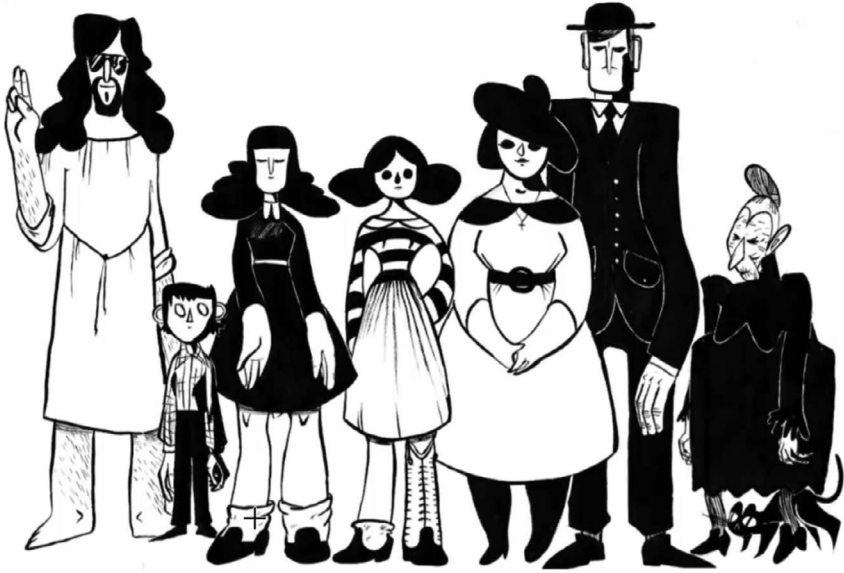


Figure 12.2 Test illustration of the protagonists in *Книга всех вещей* (from the personal archive of the illustrator; reproduced with permission).

The extra care she took to illustrate the cover has to do with the cover’s outsized importance: the cover is the most important threshold between the book and the reader—it can either attract or repel potential readers. Genette (1997, 23) considers the cover to be part of the “publisher’s peritext” and calls cover art an “iconographic item of information.” Genette (1997, 24) lists seventeen elements of verbal and numerical information that may be included in a cover and notes that “these items of information are usually supplemented by more comprehensive ones pertaining the style or design of the cover, characteristic of the publisher, the series or a group of series.” Zimina (2020, 138) states that the cover is not only the “paratextual entrance to a book” but also its “intersemiotic interpretation and visual image.” For Marco Sonzogni (2011, 182), cover illustrators of translated books face an ‘intersemiotic translation’ challenge that transcends the prescriptive: “In the absence of any established interpretive criteria, how can equivalence between the visual and the verbal be determined and interpreted?” And finally, Mengying Jiang (2021, 219) adds one more element to the problem of the cover: in the case of a translated book, cultural adaptation to the target culture is often required. Paraphrasing Jiang, a book cover should meet several key expectations: it must be visually appealing to attract potential buyers, reflect the distinctive style of the publisher and the series, serve as an intersemiotic representation of



Figure 12.3 Cover of the first and second editions of *Книга всех вещей* (from the personal archive of the illustrator; reproduced with permission).

the text to ensure readers do not feel misled, and be appropriately adapted to align with the target culture.

The above considerations help to explain why the cover of *Knuza vsex veyeyü* is completely different from that of the Dutch version, illustrated by Peter-Paul Rauwerda. The Dutch cover is sober and conveys the book’s realism: Thomas is looking out the window, his gaze fixed on the figure of a little girl. His desk is beside him, and atop it is an open notebook (‘the book of everything’) in which he describes everything that happens to him. The boy is lonely; he experiences the world only through his window-gazing and his writing.

In contrast, the cover of the Russian version (for both the first and second editions, see below) portrays the story’s surreal elements. Serdyukova recounted making many different variations of the cover illustration with fish (recall Thomas’s blood-red fishbowl), which activate two central motifs in the book: religious fanaticism and violence. At a later stage, the creative team decided to emphasise the theme of religion even more, giving the cover the structure of a Russian icon: Thomas with his fishbowl filled with red water in the foreground, and his father with half-extended arms hovering in the background. The image of the latter alludes to God the Father, whose methods seem as questionable to Thomas as those of his



Figure 12.4 Russian icon alongside drafts of cover art for the first edition of *Knuza vsex veyeyü* (from the personal archive of the illustrator; reproduced with permission).

own father. This cover enabled Serdyukova to fulfil various technical requirements associated with the design specifications of the Best New Book series, in which the translation was set to be published.

According to the translator, Ekaterina Toritsyna, the book did not sell well initially because potential readers did not find the cover attractive, and this was the reason for giving the book a new cover in a later edition. This account was contradicted in other interviews: the 2013 print run sold out quickly, a new print run followed in 2014, and a second edition was published in 2015 with the same cover. It was not until 2020, when *Книга всех вещей* was selected to be included in the Samokat Classics series, that the book would receive a new cover. The editorial staff at Samokat reported consulting online reader reviews and learning that many readers enjoyed the hippie-like depiction of Christ, with his sunglasses, goatee, and penchant for anarchist slogans. They thus opted to feature that illustration on the new cover.

For the illustrator, just as for the translator, the project was a debut, and both found their way to the project through the mediation of a more experienced colleague. Serdyukova, just as Toritsyna, reported being proud and thankful that she was able to contribute. However, for Serdyukova, unlike for Toritsyna, the book was not a gateway to future book projects. Serdyukova opted instead to specialise in animated films and cartoons. Both called *Книга всех вещей* a major milestone in their careers.



Figure 12.5 Cover of the Samokat Classics edition of *Книга всех вещей* alongside other books in the series (reproduced with permission from the publisher).

## The Russian reception of *Книга всех вещей*

### 2013: Reception following the immediate publication

Guus Kuijer's visit to Moscow in 2013 functioned as an important catalyst for reader reception: not only did he speak with visitors at the Non/Fiction Book Fair, but he also gave several interviews and made appearances at libraries, schools, and bookstores. Olga Patrusheva, who coordinated Kuijer's visit, reported that all events were well attended. A particular highlight was Kuijer's reading in the gymnasium of a Moscow school on November 29, 2013. According to Patrusheva, the children not only listened with great attention but also posed remarkably insightful questions, fostering a genuine dialogue between the author and his young readers.

Kuijer's visit was not filmed, but one can find a video of another discussion between Kuijer, schoolchildren, and their teachers online ([Radio Svoboda 2013](#)), which took place at the Non/Fiction Book Fair. From this source, we know that most of the questions were of an emotive nature: the students and their teachers wanted to understand how the author was able to write a book that was both anarchistic and compassionate. Two examples are indicative: “When you wrote this book, were you guided by your own experience, or did you make it up?”<sup>13</sup> and “If this book is fiction, then why all [the violence and blasphemy]? Maybe we can teach children to deal with fear better through fairy tales?”<sup>14</sup> Kuijer's answer:

It can be really difficult to understand that fiction can also be true. When children ask me if this is a made-up story, I say: “Yes, it's a made-up story, but it's also true.” When Dostoevsky wrote *Crime and Punishment*, he was not describing a true story, but at the same time it is a great truth. ([Radio Svoboda 2013](#))

Another question: “Children must respect the parents. Don't you think children can lose respect for parents after reading this book?”<sup>15</sup> Kuijer's answer: “I think a lot of people may find my book disrespectful, but one has to be disrespectful sometimes in certain situations” ([Radio Svoboda 2013](#)).

This enthusiastic yet critical initial reception contributed to a unique atmosphere surrounding *Книга всех вещей*, as noted by Olga Patrusheva. She described it as embodying a sense of *per aspera ad astra* (“through adversity to the stars”), shaped by the narrative of a wise, elder author from a distant land who had endured a challenging childhood and, after a successful writing career spanning three decades, finally summoned the courage to confront his childhood traumas in his work. Domestic violence remains a pervasive issue in Russia, and engaging with the book and its author appeared to inspire hope among some readers that it might

be possible to overcome domestic violence and, perhaps, address other forms of societal violence in the future. This sense of optimism is evident in many of the Russian interviews with Guus Kuijer published following his Moscow visit, as well as in the initial reviews of his book, though it is important to note that such interpretations reflect only part of the reception narrative.

An example of this is a short review in the children's literature magazine *Bibliogid*:

The book masterfully intertwines (but does not mix up) several spaces at once: real life and the world of imagination, small, good-natured magic and a Christian worldview. This cultural polyphony produces a powerful artistic effect and *gives an amazing feeling of freedom*. Kuijer's story is exactly about this: only by stepping over their fear do his characters become happy. And without any supernatural intervention.<sup>16</sup> (Vinogradova n.d., our emphasis)

When Olga Patrusheva spoke to us about the presentations of the book in the framework of the Non/Fiction Book Fair, she expressed nostalgia for that time. In the dry administrative language of the Dutch Foundation for Literature's 2013 year-end report, the visit is described thus: "The Foundation organised [...] a large delegation at the Moscow Non/Fiction Festival, where among others Geert Mak, Herman Koch, and Guus Kuijer held readings, signed books and debated societal issues."<sup>17</sup> The act of "debating social issues" represented a refreshing change for Russians in 2013—something that was deeply valued at the time and is now remembered with a sense of nostalgia.

### *The Samokat Classics re-edition*

By 2020, the two print runs of 3,000 copies each had sold out but there was still demand for the book, so the publisher decided to reissue *Knuzha ecex veyceŭ* in the Samokat Classics series, as described above. The series consists of ten books that Samokat considers most representative of its publishing activities, books that were milestones in the development of their editorial mission. The first five titles in the series are indicative: *An der Arche um Acht* (Meet at the ark at eight) by Ulrich Hub, *Η τελευταία μαύρη γάτα* (The last black cat) by Eugene Trivizas, *La famosa invasione degli orsi in Sicilia* (The bears' famous invasion of Sicily) by Dino Buzzati, *Cabot-Caboche* (Stubborn mutt) by Daniel Pennac, and *Het boek van alle dingen* by Guus Kuijer. All of these books underwrite Samokat's editorial mission "to talk about important topics honestly, sincerely and interestingly," e.g., by demystifying different forms of superstition and combating despotism.

*Autumn 2020: Samokat’s festival of daring books from Flanders and the Netherlands*

Observing a steady rise in Russian translations of Dutch books, Irina Balakhonova and her colleagues began planning for another Dutch guest of honourship at Moscow’s 2020 Non/Fiction Book Fair. Those plans were scuttled due to the pandemic, but Samokat nonetheless moved forward with an online book festival: “The Festival of Daring Books from Flanders and the Netherlands.” From September 2 to December 3, 2020, seventeen videos were collected in the YouTube playlist *Фестиваль детской литературы на нидерландском языке* [Festival of Children’s Literature in the Dutch Language] (Samokat, n.d.-a) featuring children’s books authors and illustrators from Flanders and the Netherlands.<sup>18</sup> Video 16 features Guus Kuijer and *Книга всех вещей*. The online festival was the first and only event of its kind organised by Samokat. The fact that it specifically featured Dutch and Flemish authors is a clear indication that Dutch-language children’s and young adult literature holds an important place in its catalogue and editorial mission.

*Reactions from everyday readers*

When asked what she thought “average Russian readers” made of *Книга всех вещей*, Irina Balakhonova expressed that many likely did not fully appreciate it because it challenges traditional expectations for children’s books both in terms of literariness (e.g., Kuijer’s book combines realism with fantasy, whereas most Russian children’s books are traditionalist/moralistic) and in terms of controversial content (e.g., Kuijer allows his protagonist to disrespect his parents and portrays Christ as a hippie). An analysis of online reviews confirms Balakhonova’s suspicions, but only to an extent. Unfortunately, the institution of literary criticism, particularly newspaper reviews of children’s literature, is underdeveloped in Russia, so newspaper and magazine reviews of *Книга всех вещей* were limited to two or three. However, over sixty online reviews by everyday readers can be found on the websites <https://www.ozon.ru>, <https://www.labirint.ru>, and particularly <https://www.livelib.ru>. One precursory observation is that while the professional reviewers were unanimously positive about the book, the responses of everyday readers were mixed.

Take this example from a review in the newspaper *Kommersant*:

It’s the story of a boy, Thomas, who sees what others don’t and grows up in a family terrorised by his too pious father. It starts out rather scary, but Thomas realises in time that in order to survive and win, you just need to stop being afraid. Kuijer manages to answer non-childish questions with enviable ease: the children’s world here

is incredibly deep, its tragedies are not retouched, and at the same time there is not only misfortune and grief, but also the possibility of a way out.<sup>19</sup> (“Детские книги” [Children’s books] 2013)

Compare this with a very different opinion from an anonymous online reader:

[T]he stupid fear of a woman who cannot protect herself and her children, a cowardly pious father who can only prove something to his family with his physical strength—a losing option. You cannot present God to your children in this way, because otherwise, after each blow, only one thought may flash in the child’s head: “There is no God! [...] There is no God! [...]” The sister who raises her hand at her father [...] no, no, not her hand, but a knife! Of course, I can understand a lot, but this action cannot be called right [...] What does this teach? That the solution to the problem can only be this? I didn’t understand, I didn’t get it, it’s not for me.<sup>20</sup> (LiveLib 2015.)

### **Книга всех вещей *on stage***

The book continues to find expression in other media, most recently as a theatrical production. To date, the play has been staged in three theatres: in Izhevsk ([Culture.ru, n.d.-a](#)), Tomsk ([Tomsk Theatre for Young Spectators, n.d.](#)), and Ulan-Ude ([Culture.ru, n.d.-b](#)). These productions, developed independently by the respective theatres, illustrate the book’s cultural resonance beyond the major urban centres of Moscow and St Petersburg, extending its reach to other cities and regions across Russia. Notably, the puppet theatre in Izhevsk has included the play in its permanent repertoire for over a year, with regular performances. Future research might explore how these adaptations relate to the translation.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter examined the translation trajectory of *Het boek van alle dingen* into Russian by drawing on interviews with key contributors and analysing online reception materials. Several factors contributed to the book’s favourable positioning in the Russian literary landscape: the artistic quality of the original text, the universal and timeless themes it explores, and the high standard of the Russian edition—including the translation, illustrations, and overall production—were central to its appeal. The book’s relevance to contemporary Russian readers was also a significant factor, particularly its engagement with the issue of domestic violence and its broader themes of justice, personal freedom, and liberation from fear. Equally important were the collaborative efforts and professionalism of

the various contributors involved in the project. These included the Dutch Foundation for Literature, the publisher, the translator and editor, the art director and illustrator, and the PR team, all of whom shared a deep enthusiasm for the book. Institutional elements further reinforced its success, such as Guus Kuijer’s recognition as a recipient of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, the participation of Dutch and Russian publishers in the Bologna Book Fair, and the receipt of a translation grant from the Dutch Foundation for Literature. Additionally, the Russia-Netherlands Year in 2013 played a crucial role, as it facilitated numerous joint projects, including the Non/Fiction Book Fair, which featured the Netherlands as the guest of honour and brought a Dutch delegation, including Kuijer, to Moscow. This year also marked Samokat’s tenth anniversary, during which a quote from the book was adopted as the publisher’s tagline. Taken together, these textual, contextual, collaborative, and institutional factors illuminate how *Книга всех вещей* achieved and maintained its notable success in the Russian literary landscape.

Some of these factors appear to be self-evident features of any successful literary transfer, such as the relevance of the book’s themes, the quality of the original text and its translation, and the material production quality of the book itself. Other factors, however, are specific to the context of translated literature and the case at hand, including participation in the Bologna Children’s Book Fair, the association with a prestigious literary prize, translation support from a literary foundation, and the cultivation of international contacts. It is challenging to identify any single factor as decisive to the success of *Книга всех вещей* in Russia. Instead, we propose that it was the unique combination of all these factors that gave rise to this translation’s particular lifecycle, which continues to pave the way for subsequent translation flows from Dutch to Russian, particularly ‘daring’ books for children and young adults.

## Acknowledgements

This chapter was written in Dutch by the authors and translated to English by Jack McMartin.

## Notes

- 1 See [van Dam et al. \(2020a; 2020b\)](#).
- 2 Interview conducted on September 21, 2021. Original text in Russian: “Издательство «Самокат» мы затеяли вместе с Татьяной Кормер. Тогда у нас обеих были маленькие дети, шести-семилетние. И мы обе без слез не могли видеть детские книги в книжных магазинах. Что-то можно было читать, но нельзя было смотреть, что-то можно было смотреть, но совершенно невозможно было читать. А третьего не существовало.” All interview fragments were translated from the Russian by the authors, unless otherwise stated.

- 3 Original text in Russian: “Можно сказать себе: я живу в обществе, в котором много проблем. Сложных. Не очень понятно, как их решать. Твое издательство —это ресурс, помогающий эти проблемы формулировать, ставить.”
- 4 Original text in Russian: “Можно делать то, что тебе интересно и что ты считаешь важным, и быть при этом успешным. Просто ты ориентируешься не на массовый спрос, а на потребности определенной читательской аудитории.”
- 5 Original text in Russian: “Задача издательства «Самокат»—с помощью книги наладить мосты между культурами и поколениями, создать пространство для размышления и общения родителя и ребенка. Мы издаем книги для тех, кто хочет говорить на важные темы, честно, искренне и интересно—и для детей, и для молодежи, и для взрослых.”
- 6 These figures are current as of January 7, 2025.
- 7 Original text in Russian: “Честные, глубокие, жизнеутверждающие, как на подбор удивительно красивые, книжки эти—назовем их смелыми—берутся за очень важные темы для детей и подростков. <...> Авторы, пишущие на нидерландском, не признают «сложных» тем в литературе для детей. «Жизнь у нас с детьми одна», – говорят они. Смелость и здравомыслие, которых нам так порой не хватает, присущи не только детским писателям Фландрии и Нидерландов,—благодаря продуманной и постоянной поддержке государственных фондов детская литература на нидерландском языке становится на наших глазах настоящим мировым явлением!”
- 8 Original text in Dutch: “Bij Thomas thuis wordt iedere dag uit de Bijbel voorgelezen. Hij kent al hele stukken uit zijn hoofd, die hij op zijn eigen manier uitlegt, met humor en fantasie. Een manier die zijn vader niet bevalt. Als zijn vader zijn moeder weer eens met ferme klappen tot het ware geloof probeert te brengen, besluit Thomas dat het tijd wordt voor een Egyptische plaag...”
- 9 Original text in Dutch: “een goede gelegenheid om de bilaterale relaties op een hoger niveau te tillen, zowel op officieel niveau als tussen bedrijven, culturele instellingen en niet-gouvernementele organisaties.”
- 10 Original text in Russian: “Этот год, как известно, перекрестный России—Голландии. Нидерланды—специальный гость NF. Будет представлена детская, художественная и научная литература. Кстати, в этом году в России издано рекордное количество книг голландских авторов. Шесть именитых голландских писателей приезжают в Москву, чтобы встретиться со своими читателями.”
- 11 Original text in Dutch:

7–10 juli Moskou, Rusland o.a. uitgeversbezoeken in voorbereiding op het gastlandschap van Nederland op de Non/Fiction Book Fair.

20–24 september Kolomna in Moskou, Rusland O.a. uitgeversbezoeken in voorbereiding op het gastlandschap van Nederland op de Non/Fiction Book Fair.

**stands op boekenbeurzen:**

27 november–1 december Non/fiction Bookfair in Moskou (Rusland), een internationale beurs voor fictie en non-fictie. [. . .]

**litteraire programma's buitenland:**

27 november– 1 december Nederland gastland op de boekenbeurs Non/Fiction in Moskou. Manifestatie in het kader van het vriendschapsjaar Nederland-Rusland m.m.v. zes Nederandse

**auteurs:** Geert Mak, Dick Swaab, Herman Koch, Sjeng Scheijen, Guus Kuijer en Loes Riphagen. Er waren zowel op de beurs als in scholen, bibliotheek en boekhandel presentaties. [. . .]

**bereik:** aantal programma's: 11 aantal bezoekers: ca. 500 aantal bezoekers Nederlandse stand: 2.000'.

- 12 Interview conducted on September 22, 2021. Original text in Russian: “Я основывала свою дипломную работу на паре немецко-итальянских иллюстраторов Анке Фехтенбергер и Стефано Риччи. Стефано Риччи, художник, который работает в очень экспрессивной манере, в чёрно-белой гамме, естественно, масляными мелками, пастелью, у него есть элемент сюрреализма и всегда появляются какие-то полудетские, полужверинные фигурки, расплывчатые, непонятные, никакой конкретики, но очень хорошо чувствуются эмоции, вот такое всегда с надрывом. Его супруга работает со схожими материалами, но они совершенно разные по настроению. Она более женственная, более интимная, более деликатная в своих рисунках, хотя ее сюжет тоже похож скорее на кошмарные какие-то сны. [. . .] И, собственно, вот такой вот полудетский, полукошмарный графический язык на момент работы с дипломом выработался. И, возможно, поэтому, возможно, не поэтому, вот Виктор Меламед предложил сделать книжку.”
- 13 Original text in Russian: “Когда вы писали эту книгу, вы ориентировались на собственный опыт или додумывали?”
- 14 Original text in Russian: “Если эта книга—вымысел, тогда зачем все это? Может быть, мы будем учить детей бороться со страхом лучше путем сказок?”
- 15 Original text in Russian: “Дети должны быть почтительными к родителям. Что если дети, прочитав книгу, станут непочтительными?”
- 16 Original text in Russian: “В книге мастерски переплетены (но не перепутаны) сразу несколько пространств: реальная жизнь и мир воображения, мелкая добродушная магия и христианское мироощущение. Эта культурная полифония производит сильнейший художественный эффект и дарит удивительное ощущение свободы. История Кёйера именно о ней: только перешагнув через свой страх, его герои становятся счастливы. Причём без какого бы то ни было сверхъестественного вмешательства.”
- 17 Original text in Dutch: “Het Letterenfonds organiseerde [. . .] een ruime vertegenwoordiging op het Moskouse Non/Fictiefestival, waar onder meer Geert Mak, Herman Koch en Guus Kuijer lazen, signeerden en debatteerden over maatschappelijke thema's.”
- 18 Notably, the Russian subtitles were made by Dutch Studies students at St Petersburg University, under the supervision of the translator Irina Leichenko. For the students, it was an ideal exercise in listening comprehension and translation, and for many a first engagement with Dutch-language children's literature.
- 19 Original text in Russian: “Это история мальчика Томаса, который видит то, что не видят остальные, и растёт в семье, которую терроризирует якобы благочестивый отец. Начинается страшновато, но Томас вовремя понимает, что, чтобы выжить и победить, нужно просто перестать бояться. Кейеру удаётся с завидной лёгкостью отвечать на недетские вопросы: детский мир тут невероятно глубок, его трагедии не ретушируются и вместе с тем в нём всегда есть не только несчастье и горе, но и возможность выхода.”
- 20 Original text in Russian: “Глупый страх женщины, которая не может защитить себя и своих детей, трусливый набожный отец, который лишь своей

силой может что-то доказать своей семье—проигрышный вариант. Нельзя преподносить Бога таким способом, потому что иначе после каждого удара в голову может мелькать только одна мысль ‘Бога нет!..Бога нет!..’ Сестра, которая поднимает на отца..нет-нет, не руки, а нож! Я, конечно, многое могу понять, но этот поступок никак нельзя назвать правильным..чему это учит? Что решение проблемы может быть только таким? Не поняла, не прониклась, не мое.”

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# 13 Exemplary and Divergent Translation Trajectories of Children's Literature from Dutch to Hungarian

## A Comparative Case Study

*Krisztina Gracza and Orsolya Réthelyi*

Whereas only a handful of Dutch children's and youth literature books were translated into Hungarian in the 2000s, from the 2010s onwards a new trend emerged: as in other languages, preparations for the Netherlands and Flanders' guest of honour presentation at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2016 saw an increase in translations of Dutch (children's and youth) literature in Hungarian. As shown in the translation database of the Dutch Foundation for Literature (DFL; Nederlands Letterenfonds), in 2013, four, in 2014 nine, in 2015 ten and in 2016, thirteen translations were published (Nederlands Letterenfonds, n.d.). Since 2016, however, the number of translations has declined, averaging around five Hungarian translations per year. While this still marks an improvement compared to the near-standstill of the 2000s, it also suggests that the brief surge in the mid-2010s was not sustained (Nederlands Letterenfonds, n.d.).

The two literature foundations that support Dutch literature in translation, the DFL and its counterpart in Flanders, Flanders Literature (FL; Literatuur Vlaanderen), have undoubtedly played an important role in generating a regular flow of Dutch–Hungarian translations. Translation grants in particular appear to be facilitating this process. Indeed, of the seventy-six translations published between 2000 and 2022, more than half, thirty-nine, were made possible in part by a grant from one of these two organisations (Nederlands Letterenfonds, n.d.). In addition, the steady growth of the Hungarian children's and youth publishing house Pozsonyi Pagony (abbreviated as Pagony) also appears to be a determining factor in this trend. Pagony has increasingly integrated Dutch-language authors into its catalogue, even singling out Dutch children's and young adult literature on its website (Pagony, n.d.). Additionally, several other, smaller Hungarian publishing houses have regularly published Dutch authors.

This chapter examines two distinct cases to compare and contrast how Dutch-language children's and young adult literature is introduced into the Hungarian literary landscape. The analysis focuses on two titles published by different publishing houses, each following markedly different

trajectories: one published by Pagony, which adhered to an exemplary, standard translation process, and another by the small publishing house Labrisz, which diverged significantly from standard practices. Despite these contrasting approaches, both cases share one notable outcome: exceptional commercial success.

This chapter draws its conceptual framework from the sociology of translation. According to the world system of translation categorisation, both Dutch and Hungarian can be considered peripheral languages since they provide less than 1% of all source texts for translations appearing on the global book market (Heilbron and Sapiro 2007). Heilbron notes that translation flows more often travel from the central languages of English, French, and German to peripheral languages than the other way around and that translations between peripheral languages are frequently mediated, directly and indirectly, through a central language (Heilbron and Sapiro 2007). Less has been written about the agents and dynamics of literary transfer from periphery to centre (see van Es and Heilbron 2015) or between Dutch and other peripheral languages (Brems et al. 2020; Budimir 2020; Hacohen 2014). Our aim is therefore to give a concise description and analysis of two Dutch–Hungarian translation trajectories as examples of literary transfer from periphery to periphery. In doing so, we will also compare the results with a focus on the role played by the institutions and agents involved.

### **The Hungarian translation of *Honderd uur nacht***

*Honderd uur nacht* (A hundred hours of night) by Anna Woltz (2014b) was first published by the Amsterdam-based publisher Querido on April 8, 2014. Shortly thereafter, on April 23, 2014, the Hungarian publishing house Pagony acquired the translation rights. A contract with the translator, Andrea Rádai, was finalised on June 10, 2014, and Pagony applied for and received a translation grant from the DFL to partially fund the translation costs. By October 31, 2014—just seven months after the original publication—Pagony released the Hungarian edition, *Száz óra sötétség*. This marked the beginning of a series of translations of Woltz's works into Hungarian, with six of her titles now available in the language.

A six-month interval between the acquisition of translation rights and the publication of a translated work is not uncommon in the genre of children's and adolescent literature, as these titles typically have a relatively lower word count. However, adolescent literature occupies an intermediate position between children's literature and adult fiction in terms of word count, which can influence the translation timeline. Given the dates above, it seems that the translation process went well and smoothly. However, the quick turnover between the publication of the Dutch original and

the purchase of the Hungarian translation rights is unusual for an author with no real international reputation. Although she had been publishing books from an early age (nineteen of which had been published by 2014), and although Dutch readers were perhaps familiar with her name because of her columns in the Dutch newspaper *De volkskrant*, Anna Woltz had only two translations to her name at the time *Honderd uur nacht* was published. This would rapidly change shortly after, as *Honderd uur nacht* won several prestigious Dutch and Flemish children's book prizes. Moreover, her work is appreciated by both adult and young jurors, which is quite rare. In addition, in 2016, Anna Woltz was included in *The Book of Children's Books* (Noorduijn and Vanden Bosch 2016), which was compiled for the 2016 Frankfurt Book Fair. A closer look at the acquisition process reveals several (unexpected) reasons for the quick rights sale.

#### *Honderd uur nacht* in Woltz's career

In mid-June 2023, Anna Woltz announced via her Instagram account that her newest book, *Skip en de konijnendief* (Skip and the rabbit thief), had been published by Querido (Woltz 2023). This is her twenty-sixth book. *Honderd uur nacht* was her nineteenth, and the third to be published by Querido. It was immediately included in the publisher's spring 2014 brochure (previously, Woltz published her books with publishing houses Nijgh & Van Ditmar and Leopold). In the same month as its publication, *Honderd uur nacht* garnered significant media attention. On April 29, 2014, it was selected as the book of the month by bookseller and former literary panellist Monique Burger on the widely watched Dutch television talk show *De Wereld Draait Door*. During her appearance, Burger delivered a passionate appeal, highlighting the emerging literary talent she recognised in Anna Woltz:

The time has come for Anna Woltz! She's only thirty-three but she's already written twenty books for young readers. *Honderd uur nacht* is a powerful book for young adults, about having courage and wanting to be independent. A book for teenagers and their parents to devour. She writes with a velvet pen—soft yet hard-hitting—about a brave young woman who takes charge of her life. It's as if the full stops at the end of the sentences aren't full stops, but little smiles. I was already impressed by Anna's earlier books, but *Honderd uur nacht* has turned me into an addict. (quoted in Noorduijn and Vanden Bosch 2016, 206)

Burger was not alone in her favourable opinion. *Honderd uur nacht* would be nominated for several Dutch and Flemish children's book awards,

including the Woutertje Pieterse Prijs 2015, the Gouden Lijst 2015, and the Prijs van de Jonge Jury 2015. It also won the Nienke van Hichtumprijs 2015, De Kleine Cervantes 2016, and the Flemish Children's and Youth Jury 2016 (Woltz, n.d.). Woltz shared in our interview that it is her best-selling book in the Netherlands, with eighteen print runs as of 2024.<sup>1</sup> *Honderd uur nacht* has also been integrated into the Dutch school curriculum, where it is discussed in the first grade. She added that she is often invited to schools to talk about the book with children. Its use in schools also contributes to the book's high number of reprints.

### *Woltz's oeuvre in translation*

As mentioned above, Anna Woltz's name was not yet known internationally in 2014. The first translations of her works appeared first in Slovenian in 2012 (Meisje van Mars [Querido, 2011] as *Dekle z Marsa*, published by Miš Založba) and two years later in Danish (Ik kan nog steeds niet vliegen [Leopold, 2012] as *Jeg kan stadig ikke flyve*, published by Turbine). In 2014, the Japanese translation of *Mijn bijzonder rare week met Tess* (Querido, 2013) was published, followed shortly after by the translation of *Honderd uur nacht* (Querido, 2014) into Hungarian. Interestingly, from a translation sociology perspective, these languages (Slovenian, Danish, Japanese, and Hungarian) are all peripheral languages. The central and hypercentral languages followed somewhat later: the first translation to German came in 2015 (Evi, Nick en ik [Leopold, 2011] as *Kükensommer*, published by Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag). *A Hundred Hours of Night*, published by Arthur A. Levine Books, came in 2016.

*Száz óra sötétség*, our first case, was thus the fourth translation from Woltz's oeuvre to appear in translation. In addition, this Hungarian translation was the very first translation of *Honderd uur nacht* to appear in any language. Translations in eleven more languages would follow: English and Danish in 2016, German in 2017 and 2019, Japanese in 2017, Estonian and French in 2018, Polish and Serbian in 2019, and Russian, Albanian, and Bulgarian in 2021. *Honderd uur nacht* was first included in the spring 2014 catalogue of Querido, and a year later, in 2015, the book also received a spot in the children and youth catalogue of the DFL. By 2015, the catalogue entry for *Honderd uur nacht* (see Broer et al. 2015) boasted three translations: Hungarian, English (Arthur A. Levine Books), and German (Carlsen).

### *Acquisition from three perspectives*

To achieve a more nuanced understanding of the acquisition and translation process, we conducted interviews with the actors involved: Anna Woltz, the author herself (September 2021); Lucienne van der Leije, the

rights manager at Querido (November 2021); Hanna Győri, editor and publisher of Pagony (March 2021); Andrea Rádai, Dutch–Hungarian translator (December 2021); and Agnes Vogt, grants and genre specialist at the DFL (February 2023). Our interviews revealed motivating factors for each actor and allowed us to reconstruct a timeline, which is elaborated in the next section. We came to learn, for example, that the quick turnover between the publication of the Dutch original and the acquisition of the Hungarian translation rights was the direct result of a meeting at the Bologna Children's Book Fair that took place the month before (March 24–27, 2014) between senior rights manager Luciënne van der Leije (Querido) and editor Hanna Győri (Pagony). This confirms that book fairs are often catalysts for translation deals.

During our interview, Van der Leije said that Querido offered *Honderd uur nacht* at the Bologna Children's Book Fair in 2014, despite the book not yet having been published in Dutch.<sup>2</sup> At the fair, she said that Győri had become so enthusiastic about this title that she read the book immediately after the fair then made an offer, and they settled the deal shortly after. When asked why this process unfolded so quickly, Van der Leije was unable to provide a definitive answer. "It could also be because they were very much looking for exactly that age group at Pagony. That's what people often look for, too. Maybe they thought this book fit just right in their list."<sup>3</sup> said Van der Leije. Van der Leije also speculated that the book aligned well with the tastes of her colleague from Pagony. We also spoke with the other party, Hanna Győri, whose recollection of the rights transaction matched that of Van der Leije.<sup>4</sup> Győri began by saying that at that time, together with translator Andrea Rádai, they were intensively searching for new titles for Pagony's new young adult imprint, Tilos az Á Könyvek (Trespassers Will Books) (Gyermek- és Ifjúsági Irodalom, n.d.). This series was set up in November 2013 and in April 2014, the first translation from Dutch, *Duet met valse noten* (Altiora, 1983) by Bart Moeyaert was published, as *Duett hamis hangokra*, by Tilos az Á Könyvek in a translation by Andrea Rádai (Nederlands Letterenfonds, n.d.). *Honderd uur nacht* was to be the second title in the new series. Recalling the Querido catalogue, Győri said that she found the cover and the theme of *Honderd uur nacht* "very attractive"<sup>5</sup> and that she was impressed by Anna Woltz. Rádai's memories correspond with this: "I really enjoyed reading the book and when the publisher (at Pagony) read my reader's report, they immediately said that I could start working on the translation" (personal correspondence with Krisztina Gracza, December 3, 2021).<sup>6</sup>

During the interview, Győri explained her selection process. She always keeps an eye on publisher's brochures, author prizes, shortlists, and the brochures of the DFL, with extra emphasis on the latter, saying, "we place special value on that."<sup>7</sup> In general, age category, a book's cover, and its

themes are the main criteria influencing selection decisions by Pagony. For the text itself, Győri considers literary value the most important criterion, as well as whether the book aligns well with Pagony's catalogue. In all these aspects, she said Querido's titles very often met her selection criteria, necessitating closer evaluation and additional criteria in most cases. For instance, she expressed that she is more likely to consider a Dutch title when it has already been translated into German, as she speaks and reads German but not Dutch. "I trust our translator,"<sup>8</sup> who reads the Dutch titles under consideration in the original, consolidating her evaluation in a reader report. "She knows our catalogue, our titles, we have similar tastes."<sup>9</sup>

After *Száz óra sötétség*, Pagony also acquired other titles by Woltz from Querido, six at the time of publication, allowing Woltz to be seen as an oeuvre builder in Hungarian. Van der Leije finds it extraordinary that six titles by Anna Woltz have already been translated into Hungarian. "Woltz is very productive and most foreign publishers cannot keep up,"<sup>10</sup> Van der Leije said. According to her, Pagony has developed a reliable group of readers for Dutch books in Hungary because they very often buy books from Querido for which no other translation has yet appeared. So Querido works often with Pagony; "it's just about the only Hungarian publisher who buys books from Querido."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, they also have the so-called first pick among Hungarian publishers. Van der Leije considers it a pleasant cooperation between Querido and Pagony. Staff at Pagony, she says, speak high-level English, they respond quickly, administration is followed up rapidly and they are very enthusiastic about promoting their authors. "It's a process of give and take,"<sup>12</sup> expressed Van der Leije: Querido wants to sell, and Pagony generally likes Querido's books, so they are motivated to buy; hence they are a good fit, and that makes for an equal relationship.

#### *The tip of the iceberg and what lies beneath: The translation process*

After completing the reader's report, Rádai was instructed by the publisher that she could immediately start the translation; no sample translation was needed. In June 2014, she signed the contract with the publisher for that purpose. Pagony submitted a grant application for translation costs in September 2014, and it was positively assessed that same month. The translation grant of 1,190 euros by the DFL was made public at the end of October 2014 ([Nederlands Letterenfonds 2015](#)).

Looking at this general timeline, very little about the translation process stands out as unusual. From the DFL's perspective, this is a standard translation process whereby a Dutch book is translated into another peripheral language, made possible by the translation cost subsidy that was requested. However, after interviewing the translator, Andrea Rádai, and

situating the translation in her oeuvre, interesting processes crucial to the translation emerged. At the beginning of her translating career, Rádai submitted a trial translation of a book by Annie M. G. Schmidt to Pagony. At the time, another translator was already working on the same title, but the publisher liked Rádai's translation so much that they intended to collaborate with her on another title. In addition, the publisher gave Rádai several books to review. The first translation assignment Rádai received was *Duet met valse noten* by Bart Moeyaert. The publisher applied for a translation grant from FL. Because Rádai was not yet on the list of accredited translators maintained by the two literary foundations (DFL and FL), Rádai submitted a sample translation of Moeyaert's text. This translation was assessed negatively and the grant application was rejected (contrary to what the logo printed in the colophon of the book might imply). Shortly after this, Rádai received her second translation assignment: *Honderd uur nacht*. Despite the negative review, Pagony was confident in Rádai's talent and had also informed the two foundations that it disagreed with their decision. The publisher and Rádai therefore decided to also submit a grant application for *Honderd uur nacht* along with a sample translation for assessment. In response to the publisher's notice protesting its decision to withhold Rádai from accreditation, the DFL asked two reviewers for the assessment in this round. One of the reviewers returned a negative assessment, but the other was positive. After this result, a third advisor was asked to evaluate, who also evaluated the translation positively. In short, Rádai was approved and granted accreditation, which in turn cleared the way for Pagony to receive a translation grant by the DFL. By her own telling, Rádai was disappointed and discouraged after the first round of evaluations. However, she appreciated the second chance. All in all, she was reassured by the two positive assessments.

That Rádai is a good, skilled professional was already beyond doubt for Pagony at the outset of their collaboration. She has since produced twenty-five translations (up to and including mid-2023), all published at Pagony (Nederlands Letterenfonds n.d.). Rádai has thus emerged as a major Dutch–Hungarian translator, accounting for no less than 57% (twenty-five out of forty-four) of the total number of Dutch–Hungarian translations published in Pagony's list. Rádai's trajectory highlights the pivotal role that the foundations' accreditation process plays in either facilitating or obstructing translation flows from Dutch. In this instance, the DFL demonstrated an ability to assess and revise its own decisions in response to a dissenting publisher.

Half of the translations (twenty-two) published by Pagony were subsidised by the DFL or FL. The foundations' role in facilitating the publication of Dutch-language children's literature in Hungarian is significant. That special attention is paid to Dutch children's literature at Pagony was

mentioned several times above. Grants manager and children's literature specialist at the DFL, Agnes Vogt spoke of a "very good and easy contact"<sup>13</sup> with Pagony.<sup>14</sup> Her contact person is Hanna Győri, whom she found a very good publisher from the start, "a very approachable person who exudes friendliness,"<sup>15</sup> and very professional in terms of choices and policies. Vogt has a strong impression that Győri is very interested in Dutch children's and young adult literature, and she also finds her clearly committed. She also commended Pagony for its dedication to a clear editorial vision that prioritises titles with a certain kind of message. According to Vogt, "the beauty of Dutch children's and youth literature is that it is implicit, without any moralistic messages"<sup>16</sup> and that suits a courageous publisher like Pagony very well. Regarding Rádai's approval process, Vogt stressed that negative evaluations are never final. "We advise rejected translators that they should keep trying, gain experience, develop themselves, attend workshops. After all, we want nothing more than for everyone to translate Dutch literature very well."<sup>17</sup> She pointed to Rádai's experience as an example of this. "Asking consultants remains a plural-subjective judgement call, but that's why you ask several people and try to keep the questions as objective as possible, and to still look at the quality of the translator's work with integrity."<sup>18</sup>

*A typically successful transfer process: Some conclusions*

A number of factors played an important role in the Hungarian translation of *Honderd uur nacht*. In terms of economic factors, the position of Querido and the Bologna Children's Book Fair were crucial. Firstly, *Honderd uur nacht* was Woltz's third title at Querido. In addition, Querido's reputation, quality, and consistency were decisive for the successful rights sales, as the figures show: they sign over one hundred translation rights contracts each year. Finally, the Bologna Children's Book Fair provided the venue and opportunity for Van der Leije (Querido) and Győri (Pagony) to meet. Cultural relations involve Woltz's position in the Netherlands and the grant opportunities offered by the DFL. That Woltz's was gaining national recognition at the time undoubtedly played into Pagony's choice. Upon closer examination, the grant procedure proved to be more intricate than it initially appeared, largely due to the challenging accreditation process faced by the translator, Andrea Rádai—a process that unfolded behind the scenes. Nevertheless, the translation process progressed relatively quickly following accreditation, enabling the Hungarian translation to appear only seven months after the Dutch original. Lastly, Pagony's good personal contacts with the DFL contributed to a successful translation grant proposal, without which the process likely would not have moved forward. Also, the professional network and mutual good personal

contacts among the main actors involved provided ideal conditions for the successful completion of the literary transfer process: between the source and target publishers (Querido and Pagony, respectively), within the Hungarian publishing house (Győri and Rádai), and between the subsidising body and the publishing house (the DFL and Pagony). Finally, this translation process ensured Woltz's oeuvre building in Hungarian, which all parties consider a great achievement.

### **There and back again: The problematic translation trajectory of *Koning & Koning* by Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland**

We will now turn to a case of Dutch–Hungarian literary transfer that played out very differently—almost diametrically so—from the previous case. Both cases constitute a breakthrough, but the comparison ends there. *Koning & Koning* (2000) was the first book the Dutch graphic artists Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland created together. The picture book tells the story of a crown prince who is hesitant to marry. His queen mother, eager to retire, arranges for a long row of princesses to make appearances at the palace to persuade her son to choose a partner, with no success. Finally, the prince does fall madly in love, with the *brother* of one of the princesses, whom he met through a chance encounter. The two princes get married and rule the country as king and king.

The book was first published in 2000 by Gottmer. In 2016, the authors decided to make a change, and from the fourth edition onwards, the book was self-published by their own Uitgeverij Heerlijk. Translations have been made into twelve languages, including German, English, Japanese, and Chinese. The wide international circulation, including various stage adaptations, such as a ballet in South America, demonstrates that the book was successful outside the Netherlands, and beyond the written medium. It was the book's international circulation that first brought about controversies in some of the countries, in reaction to the plotline's foregrounding of same-sex love. As the authors write on the book's website,

In addition to positive reactions, the book has also caused a stir. In the story, the crown prince marries a prince, after which the princes go through life as King & King. This is an aspect not often covered in picture books. Consequently, in America, England and the Czech Republic, the book sparked debate. There are those who find the book absolutely unsuitable for children; others, on the contrary, think that this book should be on the shelf in all kindergartens. The creators did not create the book as a 'theme book' at the time. But now the book is known as *the* picture book with regard to discussing sexual diversity. (Koning & Koning, n.d.)<sup>19</sup>

A Hungarian translation is not included among the translated versions listed on the website of the book. Nevertheless, *Koning & Koning* is the starting point of a complex and ideologically laden translation trajectory, which constitutes our second case study.

*A children's anthology about diversity: A fairy tale for everyone*

In September 2020, the Hungarian Labrisz Lesbian Association (LLA) published a volume of seventeen tales by contemporary Hungarian authors under the title *Meseország mindenkié* (A fairy tale for everyone). The primary objective of the LLA is “to empower the self-acceptance and visibility of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women, and to provide a safe, supportive environment” (Labrisz Leszbikus Egyesület, n.d.). As part of this mission, they also engage in publishing, though it is not the central activity of the organisation—since 2000, they have published no more than seven books (Labrisz Leszbikus Egyesület, n.d.). Several authors of *Meseország mindenkié*, including prominent Hungarian writers and poets, were specifically invited by the project team to contribute a story, under the coordination of Dorottya Rédei. The remaining stories were chosen from submissions to a creative competition organised by the association. Both groups of authors received detailed instructions. They were asked to “retell a classic fairy tale that was important to them from a specific point of view. Let the experience of our present time prevail in it, and do not hesitate to choose a hero with whom the minority, those who live in a marginalised situation, can especially identify, without making the text didactic,”<sup>20</sup> as the editor of the volume, Boldizsár M. Nagy, recalls in his preface to the volume (Nagy 2020).

The creators, editors, and authors could not have anticipated that, to everyone's great surprise, the initial print run of 1,500 copies would sell out quickly, with over 19,000 copies sold within the first three months and numerous subsequent editions required to satisfy the demands of the Hungarian readership. Nor could they have foreseen that, a year after the first edition, the volume would be published in Dutch, with translations into English, Finnish, Swedish, Slovak, Polish, Czech, and Estonian already underway at that time. They could perhaps have suspected, but had no way of knowing, that once the book was published, it would stand in the crossfire of attacks from far-right and not-so-far-right circles in Hungary and counter-reactions to these. They could not have known that five days after the presentation of the book, an MP from the far-right *Mi hazánk* (Our homeland) party in Hungary would tear the pages from the book one by one and put them through the shredder at her press conference with the title “Hungary is not for the aberrant!”<sup>21</sup> (Narancs.hu 2020). At the same time, when asked about the book, the Prime Minister of Hungary reacted

in a radio interview that Hungary is tolerant with regard to homosexuality but that there is “a red line that cannot be crossed, and this sums up my opinion: leave our children alone”<sup>22</sup> (Bolcsó 2020). The publication and the performative destruction of the book provoked fierce reactions. The Association of Hungarian Publishers and Distributors (MKKE), for example, gave a statement that “the destruction of books for political purposes is one of the most shameful historical monuments in Hungary and Europe. It is not a simple expression of opinion, but an identification with the legacy of Nazi book burning and communist book shredding. Get your hands off the books!”<sup>23</sup> (MKKE 2020).

The irony is that it was exactly this homophobic performance that led to the book's tremendous success. It is well known that “political and broader ideological factors may trigger or hinder the circulation of literary texts” (Sapir 2016, 83). In this case, both processes are visible, but the triggering aspect was more influential. The case has become widely known abroad and project leader Dorottya Rédei was selected by *Time* magazine as one of the hundred most influential people of 2021. A delegation of the editors and authors of the volume was invited to the European Parliament to present their book. The Labrisz publishing house received the 2022 Petit PEN award for children's literature, which honours initiatives that create a more free and diverse children's and young adult literature. With eleven translations by the end of 2023 and tens of thousands of copies sold, the international circulation of the book can only be characterised as highly successful. Translations were made into both peripheral and central languages. The fact that the English edition, published by HarperCollins (Nagy 2022) and advertised with the recommendation of Sir Ian McKellen on the cover, won the English PEN Translates award also indicates its success on the global book market (*Meseország mindenkié*, n.d.).

#### *Transfer within an unlikely Central European translation and adaptation loop*

Within the framework of the ideologically charged origin and reception history of *Fairy Tales Are for Everyone*, a no less exciting process of Hungarian and Dutch literary transfer also took place. One of the authors of the anthology, Zoltán Csehy, a Hungarian poet and philologist living in Slovakia, who is also a literary historian, translator, and lecturer at the Comenius University in Bratislava, wrote a poem based on *Koning & Koning* as his contribution to the volume. More precisely, he adapted the Czech translation of this Dutch book, under the title *Házasodik a herceg* (The prince gets married, 2020). Csehy, a bilingual Hungarian living in Slovakia, had read and enjoyed *Princ & Princ*, the Czech translation of

*Koning & Koning* made by Adela Elbel with the support of the DFL (De Haan and Nijland, 2013). He chose this story as a source for retelling a classic fairy tale as mentioned in the call of the Labrisz Association. In the process, however, he treated the original source text with significant artistic freedom, changing it almost beyond recognition. He adapted the prose into poetry, rewrote it, changed an element in the plotline, and extended it significantly, for example, by adding a Hungarian contestant to the row of candidate princesses invited by the queen. In an interview, Csehy speaks of the creative process with the following words: “I only used the Czech version of the Dutch fairy tale as a base material”<sup>24</sup> and “the work is not a translation, but a transposition and variation”<sup>25</sup> (Babcsán 2021, 32–33). The genre itself gave more freedom for these transpositions, since the translation of children’s books generally allows for more freedom (Alvstad 2010).

Another important modification in Csehy’s adaptation is that he produced only a text, even though the visual medium in the picture book of De Haan and Nijland is at least as important as the textual medium, if not more so. By contributing his text to an anthology, Csehy had no say in the visual presentation of the final publication, in which all seventeen stories were uniformly illustrated by Hungarian graphic artist Lilla Bölez. It should, however, be noted that Csehy incorporated elements of the original rich image world of the Dutch authors in his adaptation (Réthelyi and Babcsán 2022). He responded to the evocative visual images of De Haan and Nijland, which allow a multi-levelled interpretation of events and incorporated some of the visual information in the text of his poem. This is a practice not uncommon to the translation of children’s books (Alvstad 2010). But with the loss of the original images, the unity of visual and textual media in the original storybook was broken. Nevertheless, the literary product resulting from Csehy’s adaptation is appealing. It is humorous in its versification and invites different readings, which makes it one of the most enjoyable works in the anthology.

There was no formal acquisition process; Csehy did not consult the Dutch authors about the adaptation, nor were they approached by the publishing house preceding the publication. Nevertheless, the source of the story was not concealed. The names of the Dutch authors are mentioned in the subtitle of Csehy’s contribution to the volume, without reference to the title of the source text: “THE PRINCE GETS MARRIED. Set in rhyme and adapted from the leporello of Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland by Zoltán Csehy”<sup>26</sup> (Nagy 2020, 168). The question of authorship was, however, not problematised in the table of contents, where only Csehy’s name and the main title of the contribution appear, without a reference to De Haan and Nijland.

*The Princes' return to the Netherlands*

The first of the many translations of *Meseország mindenkié* was the Dutch version, for which publishing house Matan contracted the renowned literary translator Mari Alföldy. As part of the anthology *Sprookjesland is voor iedereen*, Alföldy therefore also translated the Hungarian adaptation of the Dutch children's book, based on the Czech translation, back into Dutch. The translator maintained the strophic verse form, and since she was aware of the existence of the source text, she gave an intertextual wink to the original in the last line. Instead of closely translating Csehy, she quotes almost verbatim the line from the original Dutch children's book: "And the princes lived their lives as King and King from then on"<sup>27</sup> (Csehy 2021, 174). Matan added extra ideologically laden paratexts to the volume in the form of an afterword by the translator explaining the Hungarian political situation and an epilogue by the publisher. Significantly, they also changed the title of Csehy's adaptation in the book and in the table of contents. The exact title of the original Dutch book is cited along with the names of the authors above the poem and in the table of contents: "THE PRINCE GETS MARRIED. Set in rhyme and adapted from Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland's picture book *Koning & Koning* by Zoltán Csehy"<sup>28</sup> (Nagy 2021, 5; Csehy 2021, 168). The publication does not indicate the involvement of the DFL, but in response to our question, the translator told us that she did apply for and receive a personal translation grant (Mari Alföldy, pers. comm., October 7, 2021).

During the preparations for the Dutch translation, De Haan and Nijland were informed by the Hungarian publishing house Labrisz in retrospect that their book was used as a source of adaptation for one of the stories. Both the Hungarian publisher and the adaptor/author apologised, and a symbolic royalty was paid. The Dutch authors have mixed feelings about the process. They consider the success of the Hungarian storybook with its emphasis on diversity in a country where LGBTQ rights are under attack as a reason to support the volume. They are also pleased that their book was a source of inspiration and appreciate evidence of the vitality of their work, which has returned to Dutch literature through three languages and through the hands of so many enthusiastic creative artists committed to literature and the importance of diversity. At the same time, they understandably disapprove of the lack of communication and the author's choice to adapt their book without first requesting permission to use the story. According to an unpublished interview with Orsolya Réthelyi, De Haan and Stern Nijland hope that the success of the adaptation of *Koning & Koning* will eventually lead to the translation of the book into Hungarian. Publishers have expressed interest in the book, but the present Hungarian government restrictions on selling books with LGBTQ content

to readers under eighteen years of age make it unlikely that they would invest in this publication.

*A successful transfer process?*

The international attention for *Meseország mindenkié* (A fairy tale for everyone), the large print run, the numerous translations, the English translation published by a high-status publishing house, and the literary prize awarded to this translation are some of the factors that qualify the case as a breakthrough success. However, we must conclude that this does not go hand in hand with a successful transfer of *Koning & Koning*, which seems to have got lost in certain ways during the process. Several intertwined factors contribute to the decreased visibility of the original authors and compromised the textual integrity of the source text in this highly irregular and informal trajectory.

The most significant factor was the choice of the translator/adaptor for a translative intervention with a low grade of fidelity and high grade of artistic freedom. This resulted in the shift of authorship from the authors of the source text to the adaptor. Csehy thus became author of the Hungarian target text and, consequently, the subsequent translations of *Meseország mindenkié* into other languages. This is visible in the table of contents and the copyright notice, even if the names of the Dutch authors are provided in the title of the adaptation. All stories of the *Meseország mindenkié* anthology were retellings, since this is what the compilers of the anthology asked for. However, in Csehy's case, the source text was not a traditional fairy tale in which the author was unknown, but a modern story with living authors. This raises the question whether the transfer can be called an adaptation at all, given the factor of recognition in the definition: "an adaptation will usually contain omissions, rewritings, maybe additions, but will still be recognised as the work of the original author" (Sanders 2016, 26, quoted in Milton 2010, 4). The process perhaps more closely resembles an appropriation, given that "deliberate interventions such as appropriation, imitation and manipulation imply a shift in authorship" (Bastin 2001, 6) or can be situated between adaptation and appropriation. However, it could also be argued that the position of the form of transfer is related to the fact that the transfer process took place from periphery to periphery. Hungarian audiences had no chance to recognise the source text as an adaptation, since in their peripheral position the two languages are largely inaccessible.

A second factor contributing to the loss of the original was brought about by the consequences of the inclusion of the story in an anthology. Anthologising always brings about questions of authorship (Seruya 2013), but in this case only one translation/adaptation was included in a volume

of works that were considered original works or retellings, which made the position of the Dutch authors problematic. This indecision can be seen in the fact that their names were included in the title, but not in the table of contents.

A third factor, stemming from the inclusion of the original work in the anthology, pertains to the relationship between text and image. *Meseország mindenkié* was fully illustrated by a single illustrator to reinforce the visual coherence of the anthology, complementing its thematic unity. This meant, however, that the original visual unity of the two semiotic codes in *Koning & Koning* was lost. The text was reframed with the illustrations commissioned for the new book, leading to a loss of integrity and visibility.

The publication and success of an adaptation could, and often does, focus attention on the original and can promote its translation, but the present government restrictions make it unprofitable and risky in Hungary to market a book for children thematising same-sex marriage. One can only hope that these unjust ideological barriers are temporary and that in the near future *Koning & Koning* will also be published in Hungary. Finally, the use of artistic freedom within a well-intentioned yet informal and, in some respects, irregular adaptation process was not initially perceived as problematic due to structural factors inherent to the genre of children's literature and the ideological nature of the transfer. Children's books, and especially retellings of fairy tales, generally allow for more artistic freedom (Van Coillie and McMartin 2020). Furthermore, the anthology was created with an activist mission to promote inclusivity, which fostered a more lenient attitude among the contributors. Initially, it was intended for a small, relatively isolated local audience of Hungarian speakers. However, the question of authorship in the translation and adaptation process only became a concern—and necessitated reconsideration and adjustments—when the unexpected international success of the volume elevated it beyond the confines of Hungarian as a peripheral language, exposing it to a broader international readership.

## Conclusion

The case studies presented in this chapter show two very different trajectories through which Dutch children's and youth literature found their way to the Hungarian market. Both examples shed light on the diversity of agents and institutions that play a role in the literary transfer between these countries. In the case of the Hungarian translation of *Honderd uur nacht* by Anna Woltz, the process was notably supply-driven, relying on professional expertise, an established working relationship, and open communication between the Dutch publisher (Querido) and the Hungarian

publisher (Pagony). This collaboration originated at the Bologna Children's Book Fair, serving as a pivotal starting point. The good relations and trust between Pagony and the DFL made a rapid and uncomplicated grant procedure and translation possible. Good communication between different parties was crucial in the different phases of the process. The transfer was completed to the mutual satisfaction of all parties and was considered a success: it initiated the building of Woltz's oeuvre in Hungarian and contributed to its status in the Netherlands as an additional translation within a broader framework of the international dissemination of Dutch literature.

By comparison, the case of *Koning & Koning* is demand-driven and is marked by a lower level of professionalism. It was primarily motivated by activist and pedagogical aims and was marked by unexpected developments, individual decisions, and coincidences. The translation, which more precisely should be called an adaptation or even an appropriation of the Dutch source, was created as an answer to the call of the Hungarian publisher with a specific request for a retelling, or an adaptation, not a translation. The goal was not to transfer a Dutch children's and youth literary work into Hungarian but to retell an existing story and fill a gap in the Hungarian book market, which lacks diversity. The retelling was made through a peripheral relay language, chosen as a result of personal interest and availability, and was included in an anthology, through which it lost the original unity of textual and visual codes. The authorship of the resulting adaptation is ambiguous, the content was virtually unrecognisable, and although the source was acknowledged in the subtitle, the copyright belongs to the adaptor, who thus became the new author. The communication between the Dutch and the Hungarian parties was made difficult by the peripheral position of the two languages. It also had a low priority in the complex, multi-author, and multi-editor project, which suffered severe ideological and political attacks and was consequently internationally embraced as an act of solidarity. The Hungarian publisher, for whom publishing is not the main task and who did not consider the adaptation as a translation, had no contact with the DFL. The completed transfer can be considered a significant success for the anthology, but not for the Dutch literary work.

Further studies are necessary for a more detailed overview of the general characteristics of literary exchange between peripheral languages, preferably involving a wide variety of genres and periods. Both transfer processes described in this article took place within the genre of children's literature and within the context of literary transfer between peripheral countries that do not share a language and that are marginal in relation to one another. A comparison of these markedly different cases clearly reveals distinct patterns of periphery-to-periphery transfer which

the theoretical framework of translation sociology allows to explore. By examining the similarities and differences between these two examples—and reconstructing the roles played by various agents, including institutions and individuals, and the influence of political, economic, and cultural forces—a fresh and valuable perspective can be gained on literary transfer from Dutch to Hungarian and, more broadly, from periphery to periphery.

## Notes

- 1 The interview with Anna Woltz was conducted by Krisztina Gracza in Dutch on September 28, 2021, in Utrecht.
- 2 The interview with Lucienne van der Leije was conducted by Krisztina Gracza in Dutch on November 9, 2021, in Amsterdam.
- 3 Original text in Dutch: “Het kan ook dat ze bij Pagony erg op zoek waren naar precies die leeftijdscategorie. Daar wordt ook vaak naar gezocht. Misschien dachten ze dat dit boek juist perfect is omdat ze het net misten.” All gloss translations were made by the authors.
- 4 The interview with Hanna Győri was conducted by Krisztina Gracza and Orsolya Réthelyi in Hungarian on March 5, 2021.
- 5 Original text in Hungarian: “Nagyon tetszett a borító, a téma.”
- 6 Original text in Hungarian: “Elolvastam, nagyon tetszett, írtam belőle egy lektori jelentést, és a kiadónál rögtön mondták, hogy akkor kezdjem el fordítani.”
- 7 Original text in Hungarian: “Ez nagyon sokat nyom a latban!”
- 8 Original text in Hungarian: “Megbízom a fordítónkban.”
- 9 Original text in Hungarian: “Ismeri a kiadónkat, a könyveinket, hasonló az ízlésünk.”
- 10 Original text in Dutch: “Woltz schrijft veel en de meeste buitenlandse uitgevers houden het niet zo snel bij.”
- 11 Original text in Dutch: “Het is ongeveer de enige Hongaarse uitgeverij die boeken van Querido koopt.”
- 12 Original text in Dutch: “Het is een proces van geven en nemen.”
- 13 Original text in Dutch: “Heel goede en makkelijke contact.”
- 14 The interview with Agnes Vogt was conducted by Krisztina Gracza in Dutch on February 2, 2023.
- 15 Original text in Dutch: “Een heel toegankelijk iemand met een vriendelijke uitstraling.”
- 16 Original text in Dutch: “Het mooie van Nederlandse kinder- en jeugdliteratuur is dat het impliciet is zonder een moralistische boodschap.”
- 17 Original text in Dutch: “We adviseren afgewezen vertalers dat ze het moeten blijven proberen, ervaring opdoen, zichzelf verder ontwikkelen, workshops volgen. Wij willen namelijk niets liever dan dat iedereen heel goed Nederlandse literatuur vertaalt.”
- 18 Original text in Dutch: “Adviseurs vragen blijft een pluriform-subjectief oordeel, maar daarom vraag je meerdere mensen en probeer je de vraagstellingen zo objectief mogelijk te houden om toch op een integere manier naar de kwaliteit van het werk van vertalers te kijken.”
- 19 Original text in Dutch: “Naast de positieve reacties heeft het boek ook voor de nodige opschudding gezorgd. In het verhaal trouwt de kroonprins met een prins, waarna de prinsen door het leven gaan als *Koning & Koning*. Dit is een

- aspect dat niet vaak in prentenboeken aan de orde komt. In Amerika, Engeland en Tsjechië heeft het boek dan ook een discussie losgemaakt. Er zijn mensen die het boek absoluut niet geschikt vinden voor kinderen, anderen vinden dat dit boek juist in alle kleuterklassen op de plank hoort te staan. De makers hebben het boek destijds niet als themaboek gemaakt. Maar inmiddels is het boek wel bekend als hét prentenboek met betrekking tot het bespreekbaar maken van seksuele diversiteit.”
- 20 Original text in Hungarian: “(A Labrisz Egyesület) arra kérte fel a kötetben szereplő szerzőket, hogy meséljenek újra egy számukra fontos, klasszikus történetet egy sajátos nézőpontból. Engedjék érvényesülni benne a mai kor tapasztalatait, és bátran válasszanak olyan hőst, akivel a kevesek, a marginalizált helyzetben levők különösen tudnak azonosulni anélkül, hogy a szöveg didaktikus lenne.”
- 21 Original text in Hungarian: “Meseország nem az aberráltaké!”
- 22 Original text in Hungarian: “Magyarország a homoszexualitás tekintetében egy toleráns, türelmes ország. De van egy vörös vonal, amit nem lehet átlépni, és én ebben összegzem a véleményemet: hagyják békén a gyerekeinket.”
- 23 Original text in Hungarian: “A politikai célú könyvrombolás azonban Magyarország és Európa legsúlygyentesebb történelmi emlékei közé tartozik. Nem egyszerű véleménynyilvánítás, hanem közösségvállalás a náci könyvégetők és a kommunista könyvzúzdák örökségével. El a kezekkel a könyvektől!”
- 24 Original text in Hungarian: “Én a holland mese cseh verzióját csak alapanyagként használtam.”
- 25 Original text in Hungarian: “Nem fordítás a munka, hanem átköltés és variáció.”
- 26 Original text in Hungarian: “Házasodik a királyfi. Linda de Haan és Stern Nijland leporellója alapján megverselte, átdolgozta Csehy Zoltán.”
- 27 Original text in Dutch: “En de prinsen zouden voortaan als koning en koning door het leven gaan.”
- 28 Original text in Dutch: “De prins gaat trouwen. Naar het prentenboek *Koning & Koning* van Linda de Haan en Stern Nijland, op rijm gezet en bewerkt door Zoltán Csehy.”

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## 14 The Migratory Route of Dutch Non-fiction

A Study of the Production and Reception of the Spanish Translation of *Melancholie van de onrust* by Joke J. Hermsen

*Carmen Clavero Fernández  
and Goedele De Sterck*

This chapter examines the transfer of non-fiction from Dutch into Spanish, focusing on a title that falls outside the categories of established classics or global bestsellers, two areas that have been extensively studied. Previous case studies have for instance analysed works by authors such as Hadewijch, Joost van den Vondel, Hendrik Conscience, Louis Couperus, and Willem Elsschot (Brems et al. 2017), Johan Huizinga and Multatuli (D’Haen 2019), and Cees Nooteboom (Ross 2021). The primary objective of this chapter is to examine the circumstances surrounding the creation, production, and reception of *Melancholie van de onrust* (Melancholy in times of turmoil; hereafter *Melancholie*), written by Joke J. Hermsen and published in the Netherlands by De Arbeiderspers in 2017, as well as its journey to Spain in 2019 under the title *La melancolía en tiempos de incertidumbre* (hereafter *Melancolía*), translated by Gonzalo Fernández Gómez and published by Siruela. The analysis focuses on the roles played by all agents involved in the book’s trajectory across both literary landscapes, including the author, the translator, the Dutch and Spanish publishers, the literary agent, and the Dutch Foundation for Literature, an organisation financed by the Dutch government which is responsible for promoting and supporting Dutch literature abroad, notably through the awarding of translation grants to foreign publishers. Particular attention is given to the branding of the book’s genre.

Before embarking on the case study, let us contextualise it by situating translated literature in the Spanish market for cultural goods. According to a recent consumer report (López Olaondo 2023), books accounted for 74% of the Spanish physical entertainment market in 2022. The sector experienced a significant growth of 24% from 2020 to 2021 (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and remained stable from 2021 to 2022 (with an

increase of 1%). In terms of genres, non-fiction, fiction, and children's books each represent around a third of the total number of books published, with non-fiction taking a slight lead. The latest sectoral analysis by the Spanish Ministry of Culture and Sports ([Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte 2020](#)), concerning 2019 results, shows that translations into Spanish comprise 15% of the Spanish book sector, with translations from English accounting for almost half of all translated works (48%). Although the number of translations is well below the European average, the linguistic diversity is somewhat higher, partly due to translations from three of Spain's co-official languages (Basque, Catalan, and Galician).<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, Dutch does not appear in the top ten of most-translated languages. Consequently, the sectoral analysis does not provide specific figures for this language, confirming its peripheral position in the Spanish (and international) translation system ([Heilbron 2020](#)). As the sectoral analysis also shows, all the categories considered in the report, with the exception of science and technology books, increased their quotas in 2019 compared to previous years. However, the share of translations varies considerably across the different categories: leisure (36%), children's books (27%), literary creation (17%), social sciences and humanities (8%), textbooks (6%) and science and technology (6%).

The statistics gathered in Spain do not provide data on translations from Dutch. However, the bibliographic information compiled in the translation database created and hosted by the Dutch Foundation for Literature in collaboration with Flanders Literature allows us to draw relevant conclusions about the significance of Spanish as a target language and non-fiction as a genre (with the caveat that no distinction is made between translations published in Spain versus Latin America). As can be seen in [Figure 14.1](#), translations from Dutch into Spanish represent 5% (1,155) of the 22,645 published titles in the database ([Dutch Foundation for Literature, n.d.-b](#)). Spanish ranks fourth after German (5,895 titles, or 26%), English (2,879 titles, 13%), and French (2,622 titles, 12%), and just ahead of Italian (1,123 titles, 5%). These are the only five target languages with more than 1,000 titles. Together, they represent 60% of the total number of translations from Dutch. All other languages are relegated to a marginal role.

As illustrated in [Figure 14.2](#), an analysis of published translations by genre reveals that, regardless of the target language, children's books (38%) and fiction (37%) dominate the literary export of Dutch literature, accounting for a combined 75% of the total translations. These leading genres are followed by non-fiction (15%) and poetry (7%). Other genres, such as graphic novels and drama, hold a marginal share but are steadily gaining traction ([McMartin 2020](#)). When comparing these overall trends to translations into Spanish, fiction plays a less prominent role (29%),

### BOOK TRANSLATIONS FROM DUTCH BY TARGET LANGUAGE

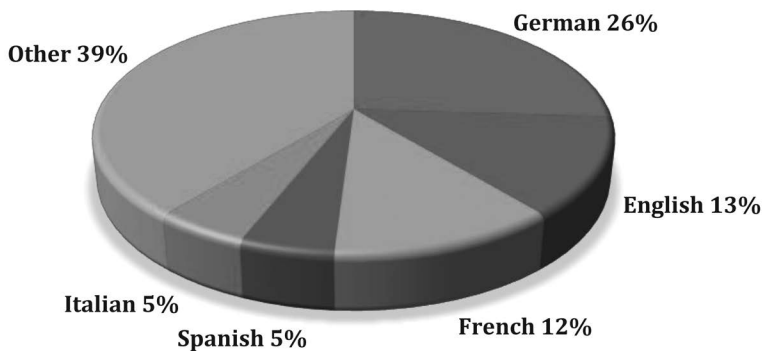


Figure 14.1 Published translations from Dutch by target language, expressed as a percentage of the total (Dutch Foundation for Literature, n.d.-b).

being surpassed by children's books (39%), while other genres, such as non-fiction (18%), are slightly more prevalent.

These preliminary considerations led to a focus on non-fiction, motivated by three main factors. First, this genre constitutes one-third of the Spanish book market overall (López Olaondo 2023). Second, it holds a significant position within the Spanish book translation sector, although

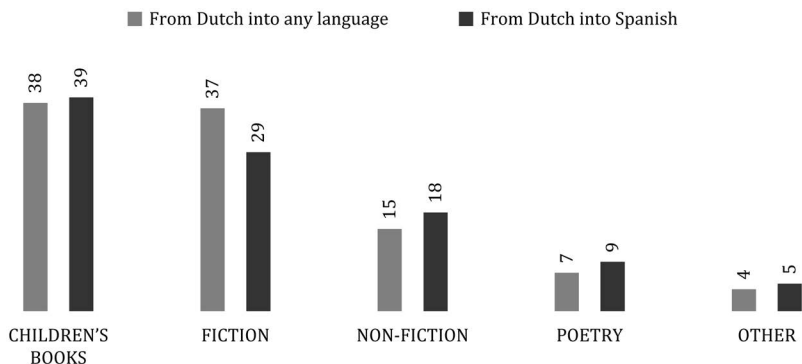


Figure 14.2 Published translations from Dutch by genre, expressed as a percentage of the total (Dutch Foundation for Literature, n.d.-a).

the publishing categories defined by the Spanish Ministry of Culture and Sports ([Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte 2020](#)) make it difficult to delineate the boundaries of non-fiction, as they do not align with traditional genre classifications. Third, non-fiction represents approximately one-fifth of the translations from Dutch into Spanish, signifying a substantial cultural exchange between these languages. Despite its importance to the book sector and translation activities, non-fiction has received less attention from translation scholars compared to fiction or poetry. The fact that only one case study in this edited volume examines a non-fiction work underscores this observation.

### **Methodology**

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the migration history of the title under examination, a total of six qualitative interviews were conducted with the following agents: Joke J. Hermsen (author, via videoconference on June 2, 2022), Jolijn Spooren (rights manager and representative of the Dutch publishing house, via email exchanges on June 2, 2022), Mireille Berman (grants manager at the Dutch Foundation for Literature, via telephone on May 31, 2022), Saskia von Hoegen (literary agent, via videoconference on November 22, 2021), Ana Laura Álvarez Vargas (editor-in-chief and representative of the Spanish publishing house, via videoconference on November 19, 2021), and Gonzalo Fernández Gómez (translator, in person on December 12, 2021). A semi-structured set of open-ended questions was employed, allowing for flexibility in the order of questioning ([Healy-Etten and Sharp 2010](#)). The pre-designed questionnaires, although organised similarly, were adapted to the role of each agent. We discussed the genre, creation, production, (inter)national promotion, translation, and (inter)national reception of the book and its translation into Spanish. The findings regarding the migration history (see sections “A brief migration history” and “A success story across borders”) are derived exclusively from the interviews with the agents.

Given the pivotal role of genre in this chapter, a comparative analysis was conducted between the genre labels and characteristics mentioned in interview responses, which may reflect subjective biases, and those found in previously published promotional materials, which are presumed to be more objective (see the section “A portrait of a genre”). To this end, the information obtained from the interviews was complemented by an analysis of the promotional texts surrounding the publications in Dutch and Spanish, that is, websites and online catalogues. Ultimately, the branding of the genre by the agents involved in the publishing process, as reflected in interviews and promotional materials, was compared with the reception of the genre in book reviews by both critics and general readers. The corpus

of critical reviews comprises nine book reviews in leading Dutch, Flemish, and Spanish newspapers. Only reviews that were entirely devoted to Hermesen's book in national media have been considered. Furthermore, two reviews published in a philosophical journal were identified. The corpus of texts by critics and experts was expanded with the inclusion of sixty-two reader reviews gathered from online platforms such as Amazon, Goodreads, Bol, and Hebban. In conclusion, the analysis employs a triangulation approach (Alves 2003; Bolderston 2012), integrating interview data and text analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the branding and reception of the genre.

**Key concepts: Literary branding, agency, paratexts, and non-fiction**

Books are not created, published, translated, and read in isolation. They stem from connections and interactions between authors, publishers, sponsors, translators, and readers and are embedded in a society, culture, and literary tradition (Bourdieu 1992; Brems et al. 2017). Book promotion plays an important role in the successful cross-border movement of translations. Today's increasingly internationalised, digitalised, and business-oriented publishing world accelerates and intensifies this phenomenon, now understood in terms of *literary branding*. Van den Braber et al. (2021, 19) define this concept as an interactive and dynamic process in which all parties involved contribute, through their "agency," to "making a brand" of an author, a work, or a genre, thereby generating commercial and/or literary expectations. Pierre Bourdieu's distinction between economic and symbolic capital has been particularly influential in understanding how literary branding accomplishes both profit-driven and prestige-driven objectives (Bourdieu 1992). In order to shape and reinforce a specific brand identity, agents make use of paratextual elements. According to Batchelor (2018, 142), the term *paratext* refers to any "threshold for a text that has the potential to influence the way(s) the text is received," regardless of the format in which it is distributed (including print, online, oral, or any other medium), of who created it (authors, translators, publishers, grants managers, readers, etc.), or whether it is related to the source text or the translation. In alignment with the theoretical framework put forth by Van den Braber et al. (2021) and Batchelor (2018), both the websites and catalogues of the agents interviewed, as well as the book reviews from critics and general readers, are regarded here as paratexts. These artefacts shed light on how the book and its translation are perceived and received by all parties and may even influence wider reception. Literary branding is particularly pertinent in this case study, as the book under analysis belongs to a genre that is challenging to define and delineate.

In *Melancholie*, Hermsen elucidates how suppressed melancholy often manifests itself as anxiety, depression, and xenophobia. Her depiction of humans as *Homo melancholicus* highlights our capacity to transform loss and the passage of time into creativity and hope. Drawing on thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Ernst Bloch, and Lou Andreas-Salomé, Hermsen explores the conditions under which individuals find the courage, determination, and hope to transcend loss and forge new connections with the world and themselves (Ediciones Siruela, n.d.).

There is no doubt that *Melancholie* belongs to the realm of non-fiction, but the specific type of non-fiction it represents remains unclear. How and where does it fit within the broader genre? Scholars debate whether essays and their translations should be classified as literature and literary translations, respectively (Santana López 2022). According to Zaro (2019, 44), the decisive criterion lies in “the aesthetic intentions or effects” of the source text. Cline (2012, 30) refuses to label books as literary non-fiction if “the language is not literary, or there is insufficient imagination brought to the subject, or the themes are too ephemeral.” For Gillies (2012, 36), it is the complexity of a “multi-layered approach” that allows non-fiction to be literary. Wittman (2018, 256) also associates literary quality with complexity, in addition to “cultural and linguistic specificity, nuances of style, and individual voice.” Finally, Marco Borillo (2017) introduced the term *literature of ideas* to describe the hybrid character of a genre that straddles (literary) art and science, combining specialisation and literariness—defined as the intentional focus on style, form, and expressive function.

It can therefore be argued that a case-by-case approach should be adopted when considering the classification of non-fiction within or beyond the boundaries of literature. In this regard, an analysis was conducted of the genre labels assigned to *Melancholie* in the interviews and the Dutch and Spanish paratexts. We examined the extent to which the source text and its translation are branded and read as art or science, as literature or as well-written popular science. In this regard, it should be noted that we understand science to mean all areas of knowledge covered by the UNESCO nomenclature for fields of science and technology, which includes philosophy (SKOS-UM, n.d.).

### Case study: *Melancholie*'s journey to Spain

#### *A brief migration history*

*Melancholie van de onrust* reached Spain in October 2019, but its migration from the Netherlands began to take shape in 2016. This is the year Saskia von Hoegen (literary agent), at the agency SvH Literarische Agentur, began her collaboration with the Dutch publishing house

De Arbeiderspers (part of Singel Uitgeverijen) as a literary agent for Joke J. Hermsen in Spain and Germany.

In 2016, when Von Hoegen and Singel Uitgeverijen began their collaboration, *Melancholie* had not yet been written. The book was eventually published in the Netherlands in September 2017. De Arbeiderspers informed the literary agent of the book's success, highlighting over 24,000 copies sold across six print runs and the positive reviews in prominent media outlets such as *De Morgen* and *De Volkskrant*. This information played a crucial role in the Spanish publisher's decision to acquire the translation rights (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021).<sup>2</sup> Von Hoegen subsequently approached Ana Laura Álvarez Vargas, Siruela's editor-in-chief of adult non-fiction, leading to the Spanish publisher purchasing the rights in 2018.

Ediciones Siruela is a medium-sized independent literary publishing house founded in 1982 by Jacobo Fitz-James Stuart, who also uses the name Jacobo Siruela. Initially, it focused on offering new translations of European medieval literature. Over time, the publisher expanded its scope and now features a diverse catalogue that includes classic and contemporary fiction, crime novels, essays, and children's and young adult literature. According to Álvarez Vargas, Siruela "looks for original, personal voices, with good stories; for windows that open up knowledge of the world around us, but that also make us understand where all these stories come from" (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021).<sup>3</sup>

In the realm of non-fiction, Siruela focuses on books that address timeless and universal themes of enduring human interest from a multidisciplinary perspective. As an editor, Álvarez Vargas actively seeks out such content while also receiving information about new releases from publishers and literary agencies (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021). One of these agencies is SvH Literarische Agentur. Von Hoegen and Álvarez Vargas met a few times at different book fairs and had built a professional relationship. In fact, a few years before *Melancholie* was published, during an in-person interview at Siruela's headquarters in Madrid, Von Hoegen had already proposed the translation of another work by Joke J. Hermsen (*Stil de tijd*). However, Siruela had just published a book covering the same topic and the proposal was unsuccessful (von Hoegen, pers. comm., 2021).<sup>4</sup>

In 2018, the literary agent tried again, presenting to Siruela the author's new book, along with a sample English translation (von Hoegen, pers. comm., 2021). This sample was essential for the Spanish publisher to evaluate the text before requesting a full report from a trusted reader, Gonzalo Fernández Gómez, who subsequently translated the work into Spanish (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021). Fernández Gómez is a literary translator and reader specialising in Dutch-language literature. He closely follows the publishing market in the Netherlands and Flanders,

acts as an intermediary between the Dutch and Spanish language fields, and translates works of fiction and non-fiction. His recommendation was unequivocal: *Melancholie* is an interesting book for the Spanish market. For him, the book had two essential characteristics: it offered a fresh and intriguing perspective on a universal feeling and had aesthetic and literary value (Fernández Gómez, pers. comm., 2021).<sup>5</sup>

After reading the report, Álvarez Vargas submitted an offer to the literary agent for the acquisition of the rights to the work (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021). Despite being in contact with other publishers, the agent knew first-hand that Siruela was a good fit for Hermsen, mainly because the Spanish publisher's catalogue aligned with De Arbeiderspers and both publishers have a focus on literary and philosophical books. Other deciding factors for Von Hoegen were her good relationship with Álvarez Vargas ("a very good editor and a very good reader"<sup>6</sup>) and the fact that Siruela was quick to make an offer: "Other publishers were also interested, but when Siruela made the offer there were no other offers on the table and I had no reason to insist to other publishers because we were working very well with Siruela" (Von Hoegen, pers. comm., 2021).<sup>7</sup> And so, the contract was signed.

The contract between publisher and translator was signed in October 2018, with a delivery date of May 2019. The translator was given a style manual by the publisher and negotiated in order to make adaptations to accommodate the Spanish context (Fernández Gómez, pers. comm., 2021). Furthermore, during the translation, he realised that it was necessary to depart from conventions in order to maintain the narrative style and fluidity, adapting the quotes because the author's "lexical choices and interpretations of classical or contemporary works do not always coincide with existing translations in Spanish"<sup>8</sup> (Fernández Gómez 2019). The author gave him the green light. The translation process was completed smoothly, without any further complications.

After the translation was delivered, Álvarez Vargas conducted the initial reading. The desk editor, Estrella García, along with her team of proof-readers and style editors, then edited the translated manuscript and sent the corrections to the translator for approval. Additionally, the Spanish publisher performed a final revision on the typeset text in its printed form. The layout and design of all the publisher's books are managed by an internal team, adhering to pre-established criteria for each series. The cover was designed from the original and sent with the typeset title and subtitle to the literary agent, who presented it to the author for approval. The book was published in Spain in paperback to match the other books in its series, *El Ojo del Tiempo* (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021).

One more piece needed to fall into place to complete *Melancholie*'s migration: a translation grant from the Dutch Foundation for Literature.<sup>9</sup>

According to Álvarez Vargas, the availability of subsidies is a significant factor in the editorial decision-making process, particularly for books that are costly to translate, as is often the case with less common languages such as Dutch (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021). The Spanish publisher, accustomed to applying for translation grants, sought funding for this project. The Dutch Foundation for Literature, which had already subsidised the original title, awarded a grant to support the translation. Thus, in October 2019, *Melancolía* was announced in Siruela's catalogue.

#### *A success story across borders*

The journey of *Melancholie* to Spain represents a notable success story, exemplifying the seamless cross-border transfer of a literary work that proved profitable for all stakeholders. This success is demonstrated by the substantial number of copies sold and the book's subsequent migration into additional literary markets, including German, Italian, and Portuguese territories.

*Melancolía* was met with critical acclaim and a positive reception. Leveraging the author's media experience, the publisher arranged for her to travel to Madrid to conduct interviews and bolster the book's launch. This trip was facilitated by the Dutch Foundation for Literature in collaboration with the literary agent. Additionally, Siruela organised a book discussion in Madrid, attended by some of the author's acquaintances, Siruela's editors, and other guests from the fields of philosophy and academia. Due to logistical constraints, the translator was unable to attend.

To promote the book, Siruela distributed it to several influential philosophers and academics. The author participated in interviews with Spanish news agencies EFE and Servimedia, as well as with Radio Nacional Española, and the prominent newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo*. According to Álvarez Vargas, the media coverage was exceptionally positive, with *Melancolía* receiving significantly more attention than typically expected for a Dutch book in Spain (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021). Additionally, the translator highlighted that readers rated the book highly, with an average of 4.5 out of 5 stars on Amazon (Fernández Gómez, pers. comm., 2021).

The promotional efforts and media attention bore fruit, as by November 2021, the Spanish translation had sold more than 2,600 copies, prompting a second printing of the book. When interviewed, both the publisher and the translator expressed satisfaction with these figures, explaining that the results were particularly favourable given that the book is a philosophical work of non-fiction authored by a Dutch writer who was unknown in Spain at the time (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021; Fernández Gómez, pers. comm., 2021).

The success of *Melancholie* paved the way for the publication of a second work by the author. *Het tij keren* (A change of course) was translated by the same translator and published by Siruela under the title *Un cambio de rumbo* in 2021. Additionally, since its Spanish release, *Melancholie* has been acquired by publishers in Italy, Portugal, and Germany. All stakeholders involved in the book's migration to Spain concurred that the success of this initial translation was a key factor in facilitating the sale of translation rights to other countries (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021; Fernández Gómez, pers. comm., 2021; von Hoegen, pers. comm., 2021). For instance, Von Hoegen explained that when pitching a book to a new publisher, the fact that it was already translated elsewhere helps, as do reviews of the book in internationally known newspapers and the fact that Siruela is a prestigious publishing house (von Hoegen, pers. comm., 2021). Fernández Gómez agreed and pointed out the importance of mentioning in book reports whether the rights to a book have already been sold to other countries (Fernández Gómez, pers. comm., 2021). When asked about the criteria at play for foreign publishers when choosing which books to translate, Berman mentioned that German and English versions typically serve as “breakers” for other language areas (Berman, pers. comm., 2022).<sup>10</sup>

When asked about the reasons contributing to *Melancholie*'s success, the interviewees highlighted four main factors. First, the originality and quality of the source text were perceived to be crucial. The book needed to possess novelty, timelessness, and literary weight, not only to convince the Spanish publisher and the Dutch Foundation for Literature to invest in it but also to motivate the translator to undertake the project (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021; Berman, pers. comm., 2022; Fernández Gómez 2021; Hermsen, pers. comm., 2022; Spooren, pers. comm., 2022; von Hoegen, pers. comm., 2021).<sup>11</sup> Second, effective communication and collaboration among all parties involved played a significant role. From the ease of communication and well-defined roles to the clear guidelines provided by the Dutch Foundation for Literature, these factors ensured smooth correspondence and a seamless process for *Melancholie* (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021; Berman, pers. comm., 2022; Fernández Gómez, pers. comm., 2021; Hermsen, pers. comm., 2022; Spooren, pers. comm., 2022; von Hoegen, pers. comm., 2021). Third, sample translations were essential as an initial step to overcoming the language barrier. For this book, the Dutch Foundation for Literature had commissioned two samples, one in French and one in English, which could be used by the Spanish publisher in the early evaluative stage (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021; Fernández Gómez, pers. comm., 2021; Spooren, pers. comm., 2022; von Hoegen, pers. comm., 2021). Finally, beyond the sample translation, the publisher required a detailed analysis of the book from a neutral party—in

this case, the eventual translator. The book report served as the final and decisive step in the selection process (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021; Fernández Gómez, pers. comm., 2021).

These four factors were interconnected and mutually dependent, creating a cohesive framework for success. For example, clear communication channels and well-defined roles enabled seamless collaboration among all parties involved, facilitating the exchange of information, feedback, and resources, including the sample translations provided by the Dutch Foundation for Literature. Furthermore, the quality of the source text directly impacted the effectiveness of the sample translations, while the in-depth analysis conducted by a neutral party depended on the robust communication and collaboration established throughout the process.

#### *The role of the Dutch Foundation for Literature*

Notwithstanding the Dutch Foundation for Literature's significant contribution to the success of this project, other agents involved in the process identified areas for potential improvement. One key suggestion was to enhance the promotion of Dutch literature abroad by doubling down on efforts to keep literary agents regularly updated on new releases, events, and talks. Additionally, it was recommended that the Dutch Foundation for Literature provide publishers with fewer but more tailored materials while preserving the physical format of their brochures, which distinguishes their work from counterparts worldwide (von Hoegen, pers. comm., 2021).

Another area for improvement involves extending support beyond translation subsidies by helping to promote translations after they have been brought to market. While the Dutch Foundation for Literature and its counterpart Flanders Literature were commended for the work they do to place books with translation publishers, support typically ends once the translation has appeared. Interviewees also highlighted the potential for translators to act as promoters of translated literature, provided there is adequate financial support for such activities (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021; Berman, pers. comm., 2022; Fernández Gómez, pers. comm., 2021; Hermsen, pers. comm., 2022; Spooren, pers. comm., 2022; Von Hoegen, pers. comm., 2021).

A further recommendation focused on financial support for book reports. As demonstrated in this case study, book reports are often a decisive step in overcoming language barriers. However, the translator noted that this aspect of his work is not sufficiently compensated. He stressed the importance of sample translation grants, such as those introduced by the Dutch Foundation for Literature during the COVID-19 pandemic (2021, 2022) and by their Flemish counterpart since 2015.<sup>12</sup> These grants can play a crucial role in funding and professionalising the translator's work

as a book reporter while also boosting the promotion of Dutch literature abroad (Fernández Gómez, pers. comm., 2021).

### *A portrait of a genre*

In this section, we analyse the genre labels found in the interviews and a corpus of paratexts to determine how the source text and its translation were branded and read in the source and target cultures. How did Hermsen and her publisher classify the work? Was this carried through in the Spanish market? We draw on interviews with the author and the Dutch publisher, along with their websites and online catalogues. When asked how she would label the genre of her book, the author replied: “I could say it is philosophy, but because of the literary-essayistic approach of my work, I always say it is literary non-fiction” (Hermsen, pers. comm., 2022).<sup>13</sup> Hermsen attaches great importance to contemplation and argumentation, connection with reality (non-fiction component), and style (literary component). Her website highlights her background in philosophy and literature, a hybrid profile encompassing the social sciences and humanities, and literature, but classifies *Melancholie* as non-fiction without any reference to its literary form: it is presented as an essay on contemporary philosophy aiming to study and explore the subject of the title, conceived as the essay for the *Maand van de Filosofie* (Philosophy month) 2017 (Hermsen, n.d.).

The Dutch publisher also noted the book’s hybridity (Spooren, pers. comm., 2022). The first edition of *Melancholie*, published by Stichting Maand van de Filosofie, is classified as philosophy under the social sciences and humanities (NUR code 730).<sup>14</sup> However, De Arbeiderspers, which describes itself as “a leading literary publisher”<sup>15</sup> (Singel Uitgeverijen, n.d.-b), classifies it as a literary essay under a broader category of literary non-fiction (NUR code 323). This suggests that the book can be read in different ways, and publishers can adapt the branding to suit their editorial line. In our interview, the representative from De Arbeiderspers emphasised the importance of content, preferring typically Dutch or highly international topics for promotion abroad, while also stressing the importance of style (Spooren, pers. comm., 2022). On its website, however, only the philosophical and scientific aspects of the book are highlighted (Singel Uitgeverijen, n.d.-a).

Both the Dutch Foundation for Literature and SvH Literarische Agentur brand Dutch literature abroad and serve as the main gateways to the international book market. Based on publications by its non-fiction managers, namely promotional catalogues (Berman 2021; Berman et al. 2017; Schiferli 2023) and surveys (Valken 2001, 2012), the non-fiction label of the Dutch Foundation for Literature has evolved from *literary non-fiction*

(1997) to *quality non-fiction* (1998–2019) to simply *non-fiction* (from 2020), indicating an expansion of the boundaries of what it considers literature. For over twenty years, literary non-fiction or quality non-fiction has been used to promote “books that combine fiction, journalism and academic research with literary techniques and narrative structures”<sup>16</sup> (Valken 2012). Then, the Dutch Foundation for Literature catalogue changed course. It redirected its focus, particularly valuing “well-written, much-discussed, and recently published non-fiction” with an international theme and approach (Berman 2021), putting less emphasis on the work’s literary form.

As the grant manager and specialist for non-fiction explained in the interview, this change in policy was at least partly motivated by non-fiction statistics (Berman, pers. comm., 2022). According to the Dutch Foundation for Literature’s translation database (Dutch Foundation for Literature, n.d.-b), by 2019, non-fiction books accounted for 14% of all translations from Dutch (2,898 out of 21,153), and 17% of all translations from Dutch to Spanish (186 out of 1,074). Given this sizeable share, the broadening of the non-fiction genre is understandable. Clearly, the new strategy is working. If we restrict the search to the years since the introduction of the less restrictive category *non-fiction* (2020–2023), the share for this genre is 30% overall (630 out of 2,120) and 36% for translations to Spanish (41 out of 113), an increase of 16% and 19% respectively. In addition, the share of non-fiction translation grants is growing, not merely for translations to Spanish, but also overall.

Although the 2017 Dutch Foundation for Literature’s catalogue (Berman et al. 2017) brands *Melancholie* as quality non-fiction rather than simply non-fiction, the genre labels used in this paratext focus exclusively on content and philosophy with no reference to formal quality (“philosopher J.J. Hermsen,” “a lively, erudite cultural and historical essay,” “an innovative thinker,” “one of the most prominent Dutch philosophers of her generation”).

The literary agent describes the book as a philosophical essay on a topic of global interest, highlighting the expertise and personal voice of the author, whom she (in our interview and on her website) describes as a philosopher. Unlike the other agents, she does not refer to *Melancolía* as literary non-fiction (von Hoegen, pers. comm., 2021).

Spanish books are classified according to the IBIC system (International Book Industry Categories). In the ISBN database (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, n.d.), *Melancolía* is not listed under the code for literary essays, but rather under social and political philosophy. Recalling the categories of the Spanish sectoral analysis (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte 2020), it is considered more closely aligned with works in the social sciences and humanities than with literary creations.

During our interview, the Spanish publisher claimed that quality non-fiction focuses on “topics that deal in a transversal or multidisciplinary way with issues that have always interested people and that also have narrative value, unlike many traditional essays, which are very monolithic, very serious” (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021).<sup>17</sup> *Melancolía* belongs to the collection *El Ojo del Tiempo*, which the publisher’s website describes as

[A] careful selection that includes works of historical and literary non-fiction, biographies, travel narratives. [...] Essential books, accessible to all readers, which shed new light on specific themes, great figures, eras, cultures and different countries, and which will help us to better understand our times.<sup>18</sup> (Ediciones Siruela, n.d.-b)

Despite the brief reference to literary non-fiction, the informative and explanatory function of the books is emphasised. Similarly, the branding of *Melancolía* makes no explicit reference to its literary or narrative style, but rather to the quality of its content and the author’s field of expertise (Ediciones Siruela, n.d.-a).

Finally, the translator asserts the philosophical quality and literary dimension of the work: he praises how the author conveys “a new and interesting perspective to a new or old problem”<sup>19</sup> and highlights its aesthetic, stylistic, and narrative value (Fernández Gómez, pers. comm., 2021).

In conclusion, all interviewees, except for the literary agent, brand *Melancholie/Melancolía* as literary non-fiction, insisting on the quality of its content and its literary nature (Álvarez Vargas, pers. comm., 2021; Berman, pers. comm., 2022; Fernández Gómez, pers. comm., 2021; Hermsen, pers. comm., 2022; Spooren, pers. comm., 2022). However, the paratexts produced by these same agents promote the book as simply non-fiction, situating it in the social sciences and humanities category (under philosophy), and highlighting the author’s expertise as a philosopher.

We will now compare the genre labels used in book reviews by critics and philosophers with those employed by general readers. As shown in [Table 14.1](#), the corpus of critical reviews comprises nine reviews or interviews, four in leading Dutch newspapers, two in Flemish ones, and three in Spanish ones.

In the Dutch, Flemish, and Spanish media, reviews of the book were published under sections such as philosophy or ideas (*De Groene Amsterdammer* and *El País*), news (*De Morgen*, *De Standaard*, *Trouw*, and *El Diario*), and culture (*De Volkskrant*, *Vrij Nederland*, *El Mundo*, *El País*). The reviewers were primarily critics or journalists, with the exception of one Spanish philosopher. Among the nine reviewers, four (two from the Netherlands and two from Spain) specialised in philosophy, while another

Table 14.1 Reviews devoted to *Melancholie/Melancolía* in national media outlets

<i>Source</i>	<i>Text type</i>	<i>Author</i>
<b>THE NETHERLANDS</b>		
<i>De Groene Amsterdammer</i>	Review	Jan <a href="#">Postma (2017)</a> , journalist specialising in politics
<i>De Volkskrant</i>	Review	Bart <a href="#">Jungmann (2017)</a> , journalist specialising in art, philosophy and sports
<i>Trouw</i>	Interview	Leonie <a href="#">Breebaart (2017)</a> , columnist specialising in philosophy, literature, criticism and art
<i>Vrij Nederland</i>	Review	Carel <a href="#">Peeters (2017)</a> , critic and essayist
<b>FLANDERS</b>		
<i>De Morgen</i>	Interview	Catherine <a href="#">Ongenaë (2017)</a> , journalist and lecturer of journalism and storytelling
<i>De Standaard</i>	Interview	Eva <a href="#">Berghmans (2017)</a> , journalist contributing to the weekend supplement
<b>SPAIN</b>		
<i>elDiario.es</i>	Review	Francesc <a href="#">Miró (2019)</a> , cultural journalist
<i>El Mundo</i>	Review	Darío <a href="#">Prieto (2019)</a> , journalist and editor of the cultural magazine <i>El Mundo</i> , whose areas of expertise include music, film, the humanities, philosophy, and current affairs
<i>El País</i>	Review	Luis Fernando <a href="#">Moreno Claros (2020)</a> , philosopher, essayist, and translator

two (one from the Netherlands and one from Spain) focused on cultural journalism. This suggests that in the Dutch and Spanish media, the book was predominantly viewed as a contribution to philosophical discourse, warranting reviews by experts in the field, whereas it was less prominently framed this way in the Flemish media.

Furthermore, two reviews published in a philosophy magazine were identified (one in Dutch and one in Spanish). The reviewers are a Dutch philosopher and a Spanish journalist specialising in culture, as shown in [Table 14.2](#).

In the eleven reviews, Hermsen is primarily characterised as a philosopher, with her role as a writer or essayist being introduced only as a secondary aspect. In all the reviews, *Melancholie/Melancolía* is presented as an essay. Some reviewers additionally observe that the work is comparable in length to a book (*De Groene Amsterdammer*, *Vrij Nederland*) or alternatively

Table 14.2 Reviews devoted to *Melancholie/Melancolía* in philosophical journals

Source	Text type	Author
<b>THE NETHERLANDS</b>		
<i>iFilosofie</i>	Review	Florian Jacobs (n.d.), philosopher and editor of philosophy books
<b>SPAIN</b>		
<i>Filosofía &amp; Co</i>	Interview	Pilar G. Rodríguez (2019), cultural journalist

describe it as a dissertation, diagnosis, plea, or pamphlet (*De Volkskrant*) or as a study (*iFilosofie*, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, *El Mundo*, *El País*). It is notable that all Flemish and Dutch professional reviews highlight the fact that the book was conceived as an essay for the Philosophy Month, a detail that is absent from the Spanish reviews. In all cases, the focus is on the book's content and the philosophical and explanatory nature of the work. *iFilosofie* features it as "a scientific philosophical-psychological study of melancholy and an attempt to answer it,"<sup>20</sup> while *Filosofía&Co* describes it as "a reflection that goes from the personal to the social."<sup>21</sup> No reference is made to the book's literary form, and the only allusions to its aesthetic functions are in the form of adjectives, such as "colourful" (*Vrij Nederland*, *De Morgen*) or "fascinating" (*De Volkskrant*).

Dutch and Flemish reviewers intermittently assess the writing strategies employed by Hermsen, something Spanish reviewers did not do. Such references are made in a manner that is more akin to popular science than to the domain of literary non-fiction. Designations such as "wide audience"<sup>22</sup> (*Trouw*) or "philosophical bestseller"<sup>23</sup> (*Trouw* and *De Standaard*) indicate a large and general target audience. The reviews also reference successful and unsuccessful communication strategies for conveying knowledge, which include reasoning supported by sources and facts (*iFilosofie*, *De Morgen*, *Vrij Nederland*); numerous references and quotations of philosophers perceived as hindering the reading experience (*De Volkskrant*); a not always clear writing style (*iFilosofie* and *De Groene Amsterdammer*); banal, vague, or clichéd language use (*De Groene Amsterdammer*); or accuracy while uncovering and elucidating the subject matter (*Vrij Nederland*). It can be concluded that, regardless of their professional or cultural background, professional readers perceive *Melancholie/Melancolía* as an engaging, informative, and explanatory philosophical essay rather than as non-fiction with literary qualities.

The texts by critics and experts have been supplemented with sixty-two readers' reviews from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) (*Melancolía*, n.d.) (seven in Spanish), Goodreads (*Melancholie*, n.d.-c) (sixteen in Dutch and seven in Spanish),

Table 14.3 Reviews devoted to *Melancholie/Melancolía* on Amazon, Goodreads, Bol, and Hebban

	<i>Dutch</i>	<i>Spanish</i>
Amazon	–	7
Goodreads	16	7
Bol	29	–
Hebban	3	–
TOTAL	48	14

[Bol.com](#) (*Melancholie*, n.d.-a) (twenty-nine in Dutch), and [Hebban.nl](#) (*Melancholie*, n.d.-b) (three in Dutch), as can be seen in [Table 14.3](#).

The same trend that has been identified in reviews by professional critics and philosophers can also be observed among reviews written by the general reading public. Dutch, Flemish, and Spanish readers use various genre labels for the classification of the book (“applied philosophy,” “philosophical writing,” “philosophical or political essay,” “political pamphlet or manifesto”) or for its informative, interpretive, and explanatory function (“interpretive essay,” “illustrative and lucid survey,” “dissertation,” “sharp analysis,” “exploration of a phenomenon,” “very clear exposition,” “very sophisticated explanation,” “informative summary,” “useful reference book”). Of the nine readers who provided a label for Hermesen, five classified her as a philosopher, while the remaining four identified her as a writer. No references were made to literary aspects. Instead, references to science communication strategies were again identified, as illustrated by the following examples: “offers new ideas,” “explains and reflects,” “helps to understand dense concepts,” “shows the nuances of an often incomprehensible feeling,” “illustrative and lucid,” “clear,” “explores,” “examines and interprets melancholy,” “plain and accessible.” Out of the sixty-two readers, twenty-five specifically mentioned the clear explanations provided. References to the author’s extensive use of quotations also suggest that the work is primarily read as a work of popular science in the social sciences and humanities, rather than as a literary text: “many quotations and references,” “many philosophers,” “many cultural references and wise reflections.” Twenty-one readers referenced this particular aspect.

In conclusion, when being interviewed, five out of six agents categorised the book as literary non-fiction and the author as a writer. However, no reference is made to literary aspects in their promotional paratexts. Instead, the title is presented as a well-written philosophy book and the author as a philosopher, an approach that is in line with the perceptions of both professional and average readers as well as with the labelling of the sixth agent. The decision of a majority of agents to assign literary value

to *Melancholie/Melancolía* in the context of an interview on non-fiction appears to be indicative of the higher symbolic capital assigned to a literary text compared to a well-written philosophy book of a more popular scientific nature, in both languages and cultures.

The preceding analysis gives rise to several significant considerations. One such consideration pertains to the boundaries between literature and popular science and whether both categories should be promoted, compared, and funded under the same umbrella (see [De Sterck 2022](#), which examines the branding and reception of Frank Westerman's non-fiction books in Spain). This issue is connected to broader policy questions regarding the expansion of the definition of literature and literary translation to encompass a wider array of genres and titles, and, relatedly, a potential expansion of the definition of popular science to include more topics from the humanities and social sciences. An alternative option may involve two parallel pathways, each with its own unique and essential symbolic capital.

In conclusion, five of the six interviewed agents brand the book as literary non-fiction without reservation. In their promotional paratexts, however, they omit the literary component, an approach that appears to be in line with readers' perceptions.

## Conclusions

The case of *Melancholie*'s journey to Spain provides valuable insights into the broader literary translation market and, more specifically, the Dutch and Spanish literary scenes. Despite the relatively modest position of Dutch literature in the global translation landscape, the absence of a prior English translation, and the book's ambiguous genre affiliation, *Melancholie* achieved notable success in the Spanish market, even serving as a gateway to translations into other languages.

The success of *Melancholie* in both Dutch and Spanish markets underscores the observation that clearly defined agent roles are essential for books to migrate across linguistic and generic borders and to build nests in new publishing contexts. Flesh-and-blood intermediaries ([Génin and Poncharal 2021](#)), with their strong commitment and engagement to the whole book value chain, together with the institutional support of the Dutch Foundation for Literature, facilitate this, contributing to linguistic and cultural diversity.

Despite its success, we also found room for policy improvements. The Netherlands is one of three countries (with France and Germany) where the annual direct support for the export of literature exceeds 1 million euros ([European Commission 2022](#), 80). The report *Translators on the Cover* states, "a good support system should be holistic: it should cover

not only translation, but also publication and promotion costs” (European Commission 2022, 106). Based on this case study, it can be concluded that an effective support system should also address the costs associated with overcoming language barriers, particularly between peripheral languages. Providing funding not only for translation samples but also for book reports is essential for promoting Dutch literature internationally and further professionalising the role of the translator.

In terms of genre, the renowned Dutch author Tommy Wieringa proved to be a visionary, declaring almost twenty years ago, “It’s a time for non-fiction” (quoted in Schiferli 2023, 1). As outlined in this chapter, the available evidence indicates a notable rise in Dutch non-fiction within the international translation system. The Spanish book market reflects this trend, as evidenced by bibliographic data from the translation database and the significant number of translation grants awarded for non-fiction works. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent to the database, which fails to differentiate between translations originating from Spain and those stemming from Latin America. This opens a pathway for future research to explore regional variations and their impact on translation dynamics in greater depth. However, at least for now, the growing interest of publishers in non-fiction has not yet translated into a corresponding emphasis on this genre among translation studies scholars.

Regarding the genre label attributed to *Melancholie/Melancolía*, there seems to be a disconnect between the perspectives expressed in interviews, which may reflect subjective biases, and the labels used in promotional texts and book reviews, which are presumed to be more objective. Despite most agents emphasising its literary value—a label attached to prestige and symbolic value in today’s international book market—their websites and promotional catalogues primarily perceive and market the title as simply non-fiction, that is, as a well-documented, well-argued, and well-explained philosophical essay authored by an expert in philosophy on a universally relatable and appealing theme. This perception was shared by both critics and the average reader. Ultimately, the translation trajectory of *Melancolía* illustrates the dynamics of a genre that travels increasingly well despite its own ambiguities, serving as a compelling example of non-fiction migration.

## Notes

- 1 Translations between the official languages of Spain represent 17% of the total number of translations.
- 2 Interview with Ana Laura Álvarez Vargas by Carmen Clavero Fernández, November 19, 2021.
- 3 All translations to English were made by the authors of this chapter. Original text in Spanish: “Buscamos voces originales, personales, con buenas historias;

- ventanas que nos abran el conocimiento del mundo que nos rodea, pero que también nos hagan entender y comprender de dónde vienen todas esas historias.”
- 4 Interview with Saskia von Hoegen by Carmen Clavero Fernández, November 22, 2021.
  - 5 Interview with Gonzalo Fernández Gómez by Carmen Clavero Fernández, December 12, 2021.
  - 6 Original text in Spanish: “una editora muy buena, muy buena lectora.”
  - 7 Original text in Spanish: “Había otras editoriales también interesadas, pero Siruela pasó oferta primero. No hubo en ese momento otra oferta y yo tampoco tenía por qué insistir porque estábamos muy bien con Siruela.”
  - 8 Original text in Spanish: “Sus opciones léxicas y sus interpretaciones de obras clásicas o contemporáneas no siempre coinciden con las traducciones existentes en español.”
  - 9 See [McMartin \(2020\)](#) for more information on translation grants, sample translations, criteria, and guidelines established by the Dutch Foundation for Literature.
  - 10 Interview with Mireille Berman by Goedele De Sterck, May 31, 2022.
  - 11 Interview with Joke J. Hermsen by Goedele De Sterck, June 2, 2022; interview with Jolijn Spooren by Goedele De Sterck, June 2, 2022.
  - 12 This initiative led to the successful sale of foreign rights. As of February 2022, rights to thirty titles had been sold in seventeen languages ([Dutch Foundation for Literature 2022](#)). By April 2023, the sample translation grants had facilitated the publication of nineteen translated books, a theatre play, and coverage of translated texts in radio shows, as well as online and printed magazines ([Literatuur Vlaanderen n.d.](#)). According to Esther de Gries and Joris Smeets (Flanders Literature, email message to Carmen Clavero Fernández, April 13, 2023), the scheme has been effective, as the translations and media exposure likely would not have occurred without this financial support.
  - 13 Original text in Dutch: “Ik zou ook ‘filosofie’ kunnen zeggen. Maar vanwege het toch wel literair-essayistische karakter van m’n werk, noem ik het zelf altijd literaire non-fictie.”
  - 14 NUR (Nederlandstalige Uniforme Rubrieksindeling) refers to the Dutch Uniform Subject Classification. It consists of three-digit number codes that are used to identify subjects in books.
  - 15 Original text in Dutch: “toonaangevende literaire uitgeverij.”
  - 16 Original text in Dutch: “werk dat zich op de scheidslijn met de fictie bevindt, journalistiek of academisch onderzoek dat zich bedient van literaire middelen, en vaak een verhalende structuur heeft.”
  - 17 Original text in Spanish: “temas que aborden de una manera transversal o multidisciplinar asuntos que han interesado siempre al ser humano. Que tengan cierto punto narrativo, a diferencia de los ensayos de siempre, que son muy monolíticos, muy serios.”
  - 18 Original text in Spanish: “Con una atenta selección, El Ojo del Tiempo engloba obras de no ficción histórica y literaria, biografías, narrativa de viajes. [ . . . ] Se trata de libros clave, accesibles a todos los lectores, que arrojan una nueva mirada sobre temas específicos, grandes personajes, épocas, culturas y países distintos y que nos ayudarán a entender mejor nuestro tiempo.”
  - 19 Original text in Spanish: “una perspectiva novedosa e interesante sobre un problema nuevo o antiguo.”
  - 20 Original text in Dutch: “Filosofisch-psychologische verdieping van de vraag en een poging tot een antwoord erop.”

- 21 Original text in Spanish: “Una reflexión que va de lo personal a lo social.”  
 22 Original text in Dutch “breed publiek.”  
 23 Original text in Dutch “filosofische bestseller.”

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# 15 Waiting for Gerard

## The Long Arrival of Reve's *De avonden* in English

*Jack McMartin and Filip De Ceuster*

The global dominance of English positions translation into English as a critical gateway to world literature. The appeal is clear: English commands more literary capital and consecratory power than any other language (Casanova 2010; Sapiro 2016). For non-Anglophone authors, their publishers, translators, and other affiliated intermediaries, translation into English offers both symbolic prestige and market access. For Anglophone translation publishers like Pushkin Press, a key focus of this case study, translation serves as a means of importing symbolic capital into its list: by selecting works that have already garnered acclaim in other languages, translation publishers can enhance their own symbolic standing (Sapiro 2015). Translation may also serve a translation publisher's social mission, such as countering antagonisms toward migrant writers (Codina Solà and McMartin 2024) or recovering politically suppressed voices (McMartin and Gracza 2021).

While much scholarly attention has focused on translation flows from English to peripheral languages, these studies often adopt a one-way perspective, overlooking the significant flows in the opposite direction—from peripheral languages to English (for an exception, see van Es and Heilbron 2015). Given the power asymmetry between hypercentral English and other languages, authors and publishers from peripheral languages like Dutch must adopt various “decentering measures” to gain access and influence within the Anglophone literary field (Rutherford et al. 2024, 1). One key strategy is to secure publication in English; as Sapiro aptly states, “to publish is to consecrate” (2008, 155). This can occur either through the established Anglophone publishing infrastructure—which is notoriously difficult to penetrate and supersaturated by English-language originals (Venuti 1995)—or via in-house translation, where a non-Anglophone publisher produces an English translation and distributes it to the Anglophone market under its own English-language imprint.<sup>1</sup> Digital translation publishing infrastructures embedded in the sharing economy have also begun to emerge, offering new publishing pathways into English for authors

and translators who have traditionally been excluded from the field, such as migrant writers.<sup>2</sup>

Another decentring measure is *exophony*, the practice of writing directly in a dominant language to gain access to its literary sphere. For authors from peripheral literatures, adopting a dominant language is often a strategic choice to reach a wider audience and achieve greater recognition. Prominent exophonic writers, such as Vladimir Nabokov (Russian–English), Jack Kerouac (Canadian French–English), and Joseph Conrad (Polish–English), demonstrate how this approach can lead to transformative literary careers. However, success is not assured, as evidenced by our case exploring the Dutch author Gerard Reve (1923–2006). Reve’s exophonic efforts faltered, complicating his later dissemination into English.

In what follows, we explore Reve’s complex relationship with English through the long-delayed translation of his acclaimed debut novel *De avond* (1947), published in 2016 by Pushkin Press as *The Evenings* (trans. Sam Garrett). Set in post–World War II Amsterdam, *De avond* spans the final ten days of December 1946 in the life of Frits van Egters, a disillusioned twenty-three-year-old office clerk. Frits lives with his conservative and somewhat obtuse parents, observing their habits and conversations with a mix of irritation and sardonic wit. To pass the time, he spends his evenings visiting friends, wandering the streets, or attending gatherings, all while indulging in morbid reflections on mortality and the absurdity of life. Marked by grotesque humour, fleeting connections, and existential despair, the novel culminates on New Year’s Eve with Frits’s somber yet subdued acceptance of time’s passage. Celebrated for its portrayal of post-war disillusionment and darkly comedic tone focalised through a young, male narrator, *De avond* has been compared to the works of Salinger, Kafka, and Camus. We explore such comparisons in the final sections on the branding and reception of *The Evenings*.

### Conceptual framework and methodology

Our conceptual framework draws on insights from the sociology of translation, and particularly van Es and Heilbron’s multi-level field model (2015), to analyse the protracted journey of *De avond* into English. Recognising the complexity of the processes that govern the production and circulation of translated literature, our approach accounts for the interplay of social, cultural, and economic factors across different levels (Heilbron and Sapiro 2016; Sapiro 2016), providing a frame to relate a contextualised translation history of *De avond* in English that attends to social conditions and structural constraints. Although the multi-level field model was developed to interrogate corpora of bibliographic data on translations alongside reception documents, we use it here as a frame for

conducting an embedded case study, that is, a single-case study that “not only focuses on the unit as a whole, but also draws attention to sub-units of analysis” (Susam-Sarajeva 2009, 41) in order to “take into account the complexity, embedded character, and specificity of real-life phenomena and social purposes” (44).

For van Es and Heilbron (2015), a multi-level field analysis involves three interconnected unit levels: macro, meso, and micro. The macro-level analysis situates the research object within the global literary system, defined by asymmetrical power relations and a centre-periphery dynamic. As discussed in the introduction to this volume, English, as a hypercentral language, dominates this system, creating access barriers for works and agents from peripheral literatures like Dutch. These challenges stem not only from limited economic and symbolic capital but also from structural inequalities that determine which works are likely to achieve recognition. At the meso level, the framework examines national publishing fields, the strategies of (translation) publishers operating within them, and the relationships that connect them. The micro level focuses on the roles of individual agents operating between and within national publishing fields, such as translators, editors, grant managers, and rights managers, all of whom play potentially crucial roles in connecting national fields and shaping a translated book’s trajectory.

A multi-level field approach provides a comprehensive account of *The Evenings*’s protracted translation history in English, probing the interplay between structural constraints and individual agency, and revealing how economic, cultural, and symbolic forces shape the transnational trajectory of this literary work. The own conceptual frame is applied to various types of qualitative data collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews and paratextual analysis. Interviews were conducted with three pivotal intermediaries: Marijke Nagtegaal, foreign rights manager at De Bezige Bij; Sam Garrett, the translator of the published English translation; and Victor Schiferli, Reve’s former editor at De Bezige Bij and fiction specialist at the Dutch Foundation for Literature (DFL, Nederlands Letterenfonds), a state-sponsored organisation funded by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science that supports writers and translators and promotes Dutch literature abroad. Conducted online via Microsoft Teams between May 2021 and December 2024, interviews were recorded and transcribed with the informed consent of the participants. The interviews with Nagtegaal and Schiferli were conducted in Dutch.<sup>3</sup> The interview with Garrett was conducted in English. The reception analysis relied on material gathered through standard online search tools, including book reviews and other public commentary published after the novel’s English release.

### Reve's complex exophonic relationship with English

Gerard Kornelis van het Reve's debut novel *De avonden* was published in Amsterdam in 1947, quickly selling out its initial print run of 6,000 copies and provoking a strong but mixed response from the Dutch literary establishment (Hubregtse 1989; Huff 2019). Some Dutch critics, such as Jan Greshoff, deemed the book disgraceful for its cynicism toward a society still recovering from the war; others, such as Simon Vestdijk, hailed it as a masterpiece for its dark humour and the sharp portrayal of its ennuiridden, nihilistic protagonist (Anbeek 1986; Beekman and Meijer 1973). In any case, Reve's debut quickly elevated him to the top of the Dutch literary world, where he remains alongside Harry Mulisch and Willem Frederik Hermans one of the so-called big three Dutch post-war authors.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the local success of his debut, Reve remained unknown beyond the Netherlands and Belgium in the early years of his career. In 1952, to "escape provincialism" and resolved to no longer express himself "in a local patois" (Reve, quoted in Maas 2011, 164), Reve crossed the North Sea, dropped the exotic *van het* from his surname, and swapped Amsterdam for London in search of a career as an international—Anglophone—writer:

Let us [...] publish our writings in, for example, English. The 863 Dutch people who usually buy our work will continue to do so. [...] If we really have something to say, the work will find its own way and not be forever buried in Sunday afternoon social clubs and book groups, as it is here [in the Netherlands]. (Reve, quoted in Maas 2011, 164)

While living in London, Reve wrote his prose in English. In spring 1954, he managed to place a short story, "The Acrobat" (1954), in *The Paris Review*, a literary periodical run by the American writer George Plimpton. A year later, the same periodical featured "Gossamer" (1955), another of Reve's English stories. 1956 marked the publication of *The Acrobat and Other Stories* (Reve 1956), though not with a British or American publisher but with G. A. van Oorschot, based in Amsterdam. The odd fact that Reve's first English collection appeared with a Dutch publisher led many to believe that the British did not want him (Beekman and Meijer 1973; Schuchart 1956). In 1957, five years into his exophonic experiment, Reve grew frustrated with London, returned to Amsterdam, and resumed writing in Dutch. Since no new publications in English followed, it is often suggested that Reve's English was below par—it does read "like a bad translation" (Douma 1973, 43)—that his "style and politics" were "incomprehensible" to English readers (Hawinkels 1966, 60), and that his subject matter was far too Dutch—"it is for three-quarters about *oerholandse* situations!" (Reith 2017, n.p.).

Reve evidently had problems stomaching the overall lack of enthusiasm for his work among Anglophone readers and the handful of negative remarks about the quality of his English (Beekman and Meijer 1973, 69; Hawinkels 1966, 61). Additionally, the commotion caused by Reve's short story "Melancholia" (1951), written in English and published in serial form in the Dutch literary journal *Podium* in 1951 and for which he was vilified in the Dutch press, remained an enduring source of resentment (Huff 2019; Maas 2009, 2011).<sup>5</sup> One might also wonder whether mid-twentieth-century England was ready for Reve's often provocative prose and idiosyncratic style. One contemporary British critic feared that Reve "may not have many readers. [...] English readers—I cannot answer for American—do not mind reading about cruelty or lust, providing they can get some fun out of it; whether sadistic or erotic fun, or the fun of moral indignation" (Carter 1956, 108), which, presumably, they could not. Another critic wrote simply: "It's certainly not something for me" (Schuchart 1956, n.p.).

It is plausible that the initial draw Reve felt toward the English language eventually gave way to a kind of bitterness after his return to Amsterdam: on the one hand, "he continued to look longingly at the English-speaking world and the massive sales that could be achieved there" (Maas 2011, 169); on the other, the experience of having failed to break through as an exophonic writer in London seems to have heightened the scrutiny he placed on any English translations of his subsequent Dutch work. With the exception of a few fragments in anthologies, he summarily refused to sell English translation rights to his works for the rest of his life. As Marijke Nagtegaal, foreign rights manager at De Bezige Bij, Reve's Dutch publisher, recalls, "at some point he decided that he did not want any more translations of his work [in English] because 'bad' people had had a go at it, with good intentions but with mediocre results."<sup>6</sup> After Reve's death in 2006, his partner and estate executor Joop Schafthuizen continued this policy of non-translation into English.

Another commonly cited barrier to the limited dissemination of Reve's oeuvre beyond the Dutch language is its cultural specificity, its *Dutchness* (Wilterdink 2015). Nop Maas, Reve's biographer, makes reference to the untranslatability of Reve's work as one of the reasons for its slow diffusion to English: "His stories usually took place in a typically Dutch setting [...] with which British editors did not feel a great deal of affinity" (Maas 2011, 167). The translator of *De avonden*, Sam Garrett, remembers that "it felt as if the whole Dutch cultural world was breathing down my neck" while working on his English translation. "How can you translate *De avonden*?" he was asked on many occasions, "It is so specifically Dutch!"<sup>7</sup> Lydia Davis, the acclaimed American author and translator who ultimately abandoned her effort to translate *De avonden*, admitted that "there are stylistic subtleties that I would not be equal to" (quoted in Reith 2017, n.p.).

This notwithstanding, “any argument to the effect that Van het Reve’s appeal is typically Dutch, and therefore too quaint for the broad range of an English literary public, will not do as an explanation,” as the Canadian scholar Felix Douma stated already in 1973 (Douma 1973, 43) when trying to explain why Reve’s work had never caught on in the Anglophone world. As Nagtegaal points out, the fact that Reve “did not want any English translations,” as quoted above, was undoubtedly more limiting to the dissemination of Reve’s work than its supposed untranslatability. This is also evident through the many translations of *De avonden* that *did* emerge in other languages over the years, which Reve was evidently less reticent to see circulated.

In the decades following his debut, Reve’s writing became more provocative, and his life became punctuated with incident and scandal. At the same time, Dutch society underwent significant social changes, particularly in relation to sexuality and religion, and Reve was often at the vanguard of public debate. In the early sixties, Reve had become an openly homosexual public figure; in 1966 he converted to Catholicism; by the end of the decade, he was living with two friends in an open relationship, a domestic arrangement he did not hide. He wrote explicitly and extensively about a sadomasochistic fetish he called *revism*, which involved seducing a younger man in order to offer him to an older man for love and torture. British society during this period, while undergoing social changes of its own, still held rather conservative views on sexuality, and it is unlikely that British publishers and readers in the sixties, seventies, and eighties would have had much of an appetite for Reve’s work. Even when homosexuality was decriminalised in England in 1967, societal stigma and prejudice remained widespread, and open depictions of sex, particularly those that deviated from traditional norms, were still considered taboo (D’Emilio and Freedman 2012; Buckle 2015). The infamous Donkey Trial of 1966, in which Reve was charged with blasphemy and gross indecency for expressing the desire to have sexual intercourse with God, who appeared to him in the form of a donkey, would likely have raised eyebrows among foreign publishers considering his work, even though the case was eventually dismissed.<sup>8</sup>

By the late sixties, Reve actively avoided talking about *De avonden*. His German translator, Jürgen Hillner, remembers that he sought to distance himself from his debut, which he felt no longer reflected who he was as a writer (Swart 2010). In the estimation of Victor Schiferli, one of Reve’s champions,

[Reve] had a love-hate relationship with his debut. Naturally, he developed further. He was moving in other directions and ultimately became a very different writer. He no longer had much connection

with the stifling world of *De avonden*. That didn't align with the explicitly homosexual or the stylistically exuberant qualities that would characterise his later works. So perhaps he also thought to himself: "Well, we've moved on from that."<sup>9</sup>

### A long (re)translation history

Although *De avonden* would see translations in French (1970), Afrikaans (1986), German (1988), Norwegian (1993), Hungarian (1998), Slovakian (2007), Swedish (2008), and Spanish (2011), the English translation would appear only in 2016, nearly seventy years after the original novel's publication and ten years after the author's death. It was not for lack of trying. In this section, against the background of the macro-level contextualisation provided above, we retrace the various attempts to bring *De avonden* to English, a process that spans the North American, British, and Dutch literary fields.

According to Marijke Nagtegaal, some believe that a first translation attempt was undertaken by Reve himself in the 1950s, although we encountered no sources to back this claim (see Maas 2011). If a self-translation was begun and later abandoned, it is likely that Reve's advanced proficiency in English and his meticulousness about how his prose should be rendered in English complexified the project. In any case, Reve's aversion for English would keep the door to the Anglophone world closed for several decades.

At some point in the 1980s, the noted translator Paul Vincent, at the time a professor at the Dutch department of University College London, produced a full English translation on his own initiative, "out of admiration for the original" (email message to the authors, January 16, 2025). He did not actively seek out a publisher or attempt to acquire translation rights at the time, and his manuscript would remain in a desk drawer for several decades more, until January 2014, when it would play a pivotal supporting role in a subsequent, ultimately successful translation attempt—by another translator.

An entirely separate translation attempt was initiated in the late 1990s or early 2000s by Peter Mayer (1936–2018), a British-born American publisher and former CEO of Penguin Books. It is not clear how the book came to his attention, but he moved aggressively to commission a translation. Mayer asked multiple translators to produce sample translations of the first chapter, on the basis of which he would select a winner to undertake the full translation. One of those translators was a young Sam Garrett, who saw Mayer's so-called translator concours as a golden opportunity to secure a book that held great symbolic value and could help him launch his budding translation career. The book also resonated deeply

with his own sensibilities and his experience as an outside observer of Dutch culture—"I always somehow had *De avonden* in the back of my mind" (Garrett, quoted in [De Ceuster, n.d.](#)). While we do not know who Mayer ultimately selected, we do know it was not Sam Garrett. Reflecting on this setback, Garrett recalled, "I just saw my hopes blown right down the drain. That happened and I thought, there you go, Sam, that's the end of that dream." However, rights negotiations between Mayer and Reve eventually ran aground, ending the project.

More than a decade would pass before *De avonden* caught the attention of another Anglophone intermediary, the International Booker Prize-winning American short-fiction writer and translator Lydia Davis. Davis first encountered *De avonden* in early 2014 through Dutch acquaintances, who described the book as a classic of Dutch literature, as well as "boring, very Dutch, and funny" (quoted in [Reith 2017, n.p.](#)). Davis was drawn to Reve's portrayal of Frits's relationship with his parents. ("So much of the conversation between an older, long-married couple is just like this: mundane, sympathetic, but often absurd" [quoted in [Reith 2017, n.p.](#)]) Leveraging her contacts and clout in the American publishing field, Davis contacted John Siciliano, executive editor at Penguin Classics, who expressed interest in publishing the book. Siciliano in turn was in contact with Victor Schiferli regarding securing a grant to finance the translation.<sup>10</sup> By now, Schiferli was working as a grant manager at the DFL, having formerly worked as Reve's editor at *De Bezige Bij* from 2001 until Reve's death in 2006. He forwarded a copy of Paul Vincent's full, typewritten translation from the 1980s, which had been filed away in the DFL archives, to Siciliano.

However, Siciliano was adamant about engaging Davis as the translator for the project due to her name recognition and marketability, concluding that her involvement would help ensure the success of the translation in English-speaking markets. This conflicted with the DFL's policy of working exclusively with accredited translators proficient in Dutch, a prerequisite for qualifying for a translation grant. Davis is an accomplished translator from French and German, but Dutch was not among her working languages—she describes herself as a "novice" of the Dutch language (quoted in [Reith 2017, n.p.](#)). Davis was asked by the DFL to submit a sample translation, which was subsequently evaluated by two anonymous reviewers, as per DFL policy. The evaluations came back mixed—"One thought it was good, the other did not," she said. "Both found mistakes and misinterpretations" (quoted in [Reith 2017, n.p.](#)). Davis's accreditation application was rejected, no translation subsidy was offered, and Penguin Classics abandoned the project.

The episode underscores the tension between the commercial imperatives of the American publisher on the one hand, which valued Davis's

name recognition over her ability to rise to the linguistic and cultural challenges of the novel, and the translation policy of the DFL on the other, which valued translation quality and its translator vetting system over Davis's reputation. Ultimately, the quality criterion proved decisive enough to risk alienating two of the DFL's important allies in the American publishing field: Lydia Davis, whose newfound interest in Dutch literature Schiferli hoped to nurture, and John Siciliano of Penguin Classics, with whom Schiferli was collaborating on other projects. Conveying the criticisms of the anonymous reviewers required a pragmatic yet delicate approach on Schiferli's part: "I tried to make things clear as diplomatically as I possibly could."<sup>11</sup> In the same motion, he offered Davis another, less daunting translation job: *Grassen en bomen* (*Grasses and Trees*), a collection of very short stories by A. L. Snijders. Snijders, who is very proficient in English, had agreed to collaborate with Davis, helping to navigate any linguistic or cultural difficulties she encountered. (Davis's translation was published by AFdH Uitgevers in 2016.)

The episode sheds light on the professional and interpersonal complexities inherent in translation projects involving high-profile figures. Despite the rejection of Davis's translation, Schiferli's handling of the matter demonstrates the importance of maintaining positive relationships in the literary world and illustrates the interplay between professional reputation, market forces, and the DFL's translation policy.

One final detail—a line Schiferli recalls from one of the anonymous evaluations of Davis's sample translation—is worth noting here: "This text cries out for one name only: Sam Garrett."<sup>12</sup> It appears Garrett was not the only one hoping to see his fortunes reversed.

### Acquiring and translating *The Evenings*

Around the same time the Penguin Classics saga was playing out, Victor Schiferli was in London attending the award ceremony of the Vondel Prize, a triennial award organised by the British Society of Authors that recognises an outstanding English translation of a Dutch-language literary work and which Sam Garrett won twice. On the margins of that three-day visit, Schiferli had arranged several lunch meetings with Anglophone publishers, one of which was with his acquaintance Adam Freudenheim, whom he had met for the first time at the London Book Fair in April of the previous year. Formerly the publisher of Penguin Classics, Freudenheim had acquired the small, London-based independent publishing house Pushkin Press in 2012.<sup>13</sup> Schiferli had worked with Pushkin Press before the acquisition, and Freudenheim's visit to the DFL booth at the 2013 London Book Fair was a signal that Pushkin's new boss hoped to continue

working with the DFL in the future. Schiferli and Freudenheim got on well and met several times after that initial meeting to discuss books. On this occasion, Schiferli shared, Freudenheim was looking for something very particular:

He said to me, he specifically told me: “I’m looking for books that were written in the late 1940s, so just after the war. Books that express that feeling of the time, you know?” For instance, you had [J. D.] Salinger back then, or in Germany [Heinrich] Böll and [Günther] Grass. Those are the kinds of works you often find from that post-war period. That’s what he was particularly searching for. And then I thought: *De avonden!* And maybe that’s a different way of thinking than the usual approach, which often starts with the supply: we have a classic, it’s well known. In this case, I was responding very directly to a specific demand. I thought, well, late 1940s, legendary book. So I told him, there’s a legendary book in the Netherlands. You see? It’s never been translated into English. But then, of course, you can build a whole narrative around it: it’s one of the very few books that has stayed in print year after year, there’s a film adaptation, many people know quotes from it by heart, and it’s regarded as a cornerstone of Dutch literature. And the author has an interesting life story too. So, well, here was someone [Freudenheim] who picked up on that. [...] That’s where the seed was planted, during a lunch, when I thought about the kind of books he was looking for, and I thought: yes, this fits perfectly.<sup>14</sup>

Anticipating Freudenheim’s interest, Schiferli had again brought along a copy of Paul Vincent’s full translation from the 1980s. Freudenheim was charmed to accept the manuscript and the two parted ways. Freudenheim passed Vincent’s translation on to Daniel Seton, his editor, who read it, loved it, and recommended acquiring it. Freudenheim was evidently aware that securing translation rights would not be easy, since *De avonden* “had never been translated into English before, not for lack of interest but partly because the author was a bit difficult and [...] had his own ideas about it, and it was only quite a while after his death that [our negotiations to acquire translation rights] happened” (Freudenheim 2018, n.p.). The hope was that the existence of Vincent’s complete translation, which Seton found to be of publishable quality, would facilitate a swift publication timeline. Furthermore, Vincent was already a DFL-accredited translator, so the quality of the translation could be safely presumed. Freudenheim reached out to Marijke Nagtegaal at De Bezige Bij, hopeful for swift rights negotiations, delivering a bid on September 18, 2014.

Nagtegaal had recently concluded some protracted negotiations of her own—with Joop Schafthuizen, Reve's widower and the executor of his literary estate. After four months of careful back-and-forth, she had secured his approval to negotiate translation rights for Reve's work on his behalf. Schafthuizen's terms were severe: he demanded fees and royalties significantly higher than any Nagtegaal had previously agreed upon with other authors or executors. However, Nagtegaal accepted his terms, recognising the symbolic potential that an English translation of Reve's work, in the right hands, could bring to De Bezige Bij. She also anticipated that an English translation would likely catalyse translation deals in other languages, where additional symbolic and economic gains could be made.<sup>15</sup>

Nagtegaal and Schiferli have an excellent working relationship, having been colleagues in the 1990s at the Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature (Nederlands Literair Productie- en Vertalingenfonds), a predecessor of the Dutch Foundation for Literature, and having worked together often over three decades to place books with foreign publishers. Nagtegaal was aware of the sensitive situation with Penguin and Lydia Davis and had even begun rights negotiations with Siciliano while Davis's sample was being evaluated. However, like Siciliano, she had her own ideas about who should translate *De avond*, and as the controller of its translation rights, she, not Schiferli or anyone else, held the reins in the negotiations with Freudenheim. Crucially, Nagtegaal felt that for a book of this stature any existing translation should be double-checked.

Schiferli and Nagtegaal therefore agreed that the next step was to have Vincent's existing translation evaluated by two anonymous reviewers. Given that Vincent was already a DFL-accredited translator and had earned every major accolade available to Dutch–English translators, this additional quality check was unusual and can be taken as a clear illustration of the micro-level power dynamics at play. Nagtegaal's concerns were eventually partially vindicated in the resulting evaluations, and “at that point, I fortunately had a sort of expert opinion backing me up [saying] that we were not obligated to take [Vincent's] translation.”<sup>16</sup> This cleared the way for her to put forward her preferred translator:

I wanted Sam Garrett from the very beginning. He's simply the best translator I know. His translation of Herman Koch's work [*Het diner*] had been widely praised. Because he's just the best, I always wanted him to do sample translations for my authors. He also worked on a lot of our books simply because he likes them, and I think it's mainly because we value him so much. And he's a very kind man. I had read in an article—something I didn't know before but maybe you can find that article somewhere, or perhaps Sam still has it—that he had

always wanted to translate *De avond*.<sup>17</sup> That stuck with me. So, I thought, “Well, I want him,” and if he wasn’t available, then we’d have to look elsewhere.<sup>18</sup>

When Pushkin put forward its own preferred translator—another well-known translator with whom Pushkin had worked in the past and who was very keen to take on the project—Nagtegaal countered that selecting Garrett was a non-negotiable condition for any potential rights agreement. With that, the matter was settled. Pushkin received a translation grant totalling 8,600 euros and covering 100% of the translation costs ([Netherlands Letterenfonds 2016](#), 53). The contract stipulated that the translation be ready by August 2016, in time to circulate at the 2016 Frankfurt Book Fair, the publishing world’s largest, most important trade fair, where Flanders and the Netherlands, represented by the DFL and its Flemish counterpart, Flanders Literature, would jointly be presenting Dutch literature in the guest-of-honour pavilion (see [McMartin 2021](#)). *The Evenings* was published on November 23, 2016. Freudenheim, Schiferli, and Nagtegaal all brought advance copies with them to Frankfurt.

The micro-level power dynamics described in this section highlight the intricate interplay of influence, negotiation, and decision-making among key actors involved in this translation project—the fifth attempt to bring *De avond* to Anglophone readers and the first to succeed. Victor Schiferli, representing the DFL, initiated the process by leveraging his professional relationship with Adam Freudenheim of Pushkin Press, strategically aligning Reve’s novel with Freudenheim’s specific interest in post-war literature. Schiferli’s proactive approach, including providing Paul Vincent’s earlier translation, facilitated a connection between Pushkin and the DFL. However, his influence was limited by the constraints of rights ownership and competing visions within the negotiation process.

Marijke Nagtegaal, as the foreign rights manager at De Bezige Bij and the controller of the novel’s translation rights, ultimately held decisive power. While Freudenheim’s team was happy to accept Vincent’s translation and later proposed their own preferred translator when Vincent’s translation was criticised by an anonymous expert, Nagtegaal overrode these preferences, insisting on commissioning Sam Garrett, a translator she had long championed and respected, and whom she regarded as best placed to deliver a new translation equal to the task of rendering this particular Dutch modern classic in English. This demonstrates the critical role of individual agency within interpersonal and institutional frameworks, which in turn respond to market-driven and legal constraints.

In terms of explicit translation policy, translator accreditation holds special relevance in this case. Accreditation by the DFL is a formal acknowledgement of a translator’s competence, enabling access to translation

subsidies, a pivotal criterion shaping publishers' selection decisions. Paul Vincent's status as a long-time DFL-accredited translator with an established reputation typically would have streamlined negotiations and expedited the project timeline. However, the unusual decision to subject Vincent's translation to additional evaluations highlights the micro-level power dynamics and differing priorities among stakeholders, but also what was at stake: the long-awaited entry of a modern Dutch classic into English. Marijke Nagtegaal's insistence on commissioning Sam Garrett (also a DFL-accredited translator) reveals both a preference for and power to elevate a translator who aligned better with her vision for the project and her symbolic goals for the English edition and, by extension, *De Bezige Bij*. In this context, accreditation served not (just) as a baseline for quality but as a tactic used to settle a dispute over the final choice of translator.

The outcome reflects how interpersonal relationships, professional reputation, and strategic alignment of symbolic and economic interests shaped a project that came to be seen as a career-defining success for several of the actors involved. Reflecting back, Nagtegaal described *The Evenings* as the "pièce de résistance" of her entire career. For Sam Garrett, his positive affiliation with Nagtegaal, developed over decades of cooperation, would ultimately redeem his first rejection at Mayer's ill-fated concours, culminating in the fulfilment of a career-long dream to translate *De avonden*: "Finally, after all of that, my lady luck smiled on me. I was set up with Pushkin and we talked about it, and I ended up translating the book."<sup>19</sup> As we hope to have shown, lady luck was only one factor among many.

### **Branding *The Evenings***

Having completed the acquisition and translation process, *The Evenings* could finally make its way to Anglophone readers. Publishers strategically package and brand translated books and their authors to optimise appeal (Van den Braber et al. 2021) As Childress (2017) observes, branding has become a key driver in the movement of texts across languages and through the interconnected spheres of creation, production, and reception. The branding of a book, its author, and its publisher is particularly reflected in its cover design and overall presentation. Effective covers function as silent sellers, communicating genre, tone, and target audience while balancing symbolic (literary) and commercial objectives. Pushkin Press is known for its original, aesthetically distinctive covers and dust jackets. The cover of *The Evenings* features a tasteful design by Clare Skeats with a striking, Hopper-esque cover illustration by Bill Bragg (see Pushkin Press 2016). The design captures the novel's atmosphere while avoiding overt Dutchness, despite *The Evenings* being, in many ways, an Amsterdam story. In this way, the cover bridges cultural gaps, transcending specific

national elements, eschewing stereotypes, and creating an internationally appealing visual pitch. As such, the English edition of *De avond* serves as a transnational artefact. Notably, De Bezige Bij was so impressed by the cover of the English edition, it later licensed it from Pushkin to use on a new Dutch edition, as did the independent Italian publisher Iperborea for its edition, *Le sere* (2018c), translated by Fulvio Ferrari.

The reliability and accessibility of the story are emphasised in the back-cover synopsis: “*The Evenings* takes the tiny quotidian triumphs and heartbreaks of our everyday lives and turns them into a work of brilliant wit and profound beauty” (Reve 2016). Meanwhile, the blurbs focus on extolling the novel’s literary value. According to Childress (2017), two key factors contribute to the effectiveness of a blurb: the blurber must be both recognisable and reputable, and their opinion must carry weight with the target audience. For *The Evenings*, advance praise comes from Joe Dunthorne, author of the critically acclaimed British cult novel *Submarine* (2007), and from Herman Koch, internationally renowned for his bestseller *The Dinner* (2009) and often dubbed “the most successful writer of the Netherlands” (Bax 2021, 215).<sup>20</sup> Koch’s blurbs, featured on both the front and back covers, compare the novel to *On the Road* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. By aligning Reve with iconic American authors like Jack Kerouac and J. D. Salinger, Koch underscores the novel’s literary prestige while situating it culturally for Anglophone readers. In a full-circle moment, Lydia Davis supplies a back-cover blurb in the United States edition, calling the book “an important classic” and “long, long overdue in English.”

Finally, it is worth noting that while Reve’s controversial and rebellious image might have represented a sales risk in the past, it now has become one of his selling points. Even though homosexuality has little or nothing to do with the plot or the characters in *The Evenings*, Reve is branded as “the first openly gay writer in the country’s history” on the dust jacket (Reve 2016). By explicitly associating Reve’s post-war masterpiece with his pioneering identity as one of the first openly homosexual Dutch writers, Pushkin not only responds to a market demand for LGBTQ+ representation but also strategically presents itself by association as a modern and inclusive publishing house.

### Reception: A cornerstone manqué of modern European literature

Gerard Reve’s *The Evenings* was an unexpected success in the Anglophone literary market. The novel received extensive coverage in major newspapers and literary journals across the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Sam Garrett’s translation was also singled out for praise. Pushkin Press’s branding strategy proved highly effective, as

exemplified by the back-cover synopsis of the English edition, which encapsulates the novel's central themes and appeal:

Twenty-three-year-old Frits—office worker, daydreamer, teller of inappropriate jokes—finds life absurd and inexplicable. He lives with his parents, who drive him mad. He has terrible, disturbing dreams of death and destruction. Sometimes he talks to a toy rabbit. Darkly funny and mesmerising, *The Evenings* takes the tiny quotidian triumphs and heartbreaks of our everyday lives and turns them into a work of brilliant wit and profound beauty. (Reve 2016)

Critics overwhelmingly praised Reve's dark humour and sharp observations of absurdity, situating him within the tradition of modern existential realism. They bolstered the novel's credibility by comparing it to the works of literary giants such as J. D. Salinger, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre, Franz Kafka, Karl Ove Knausgaard, and Albert Camus. Camus's character Meursault in particular served as an international reference point, echoing earlier Dutch critical interpretations of *De avond*. This alignment with established literary traditions helped to frame the novel for Anglophone audiences, emphasising its universal themes over its specific cultural or historical context.

The reception of *The Evenings* illustrates what Bourdieu (1980) terms *l'orchestration sans chef d'orchestre* (orchestration without a conductor), where consensus among critics often stems from external factors rather than the intrinsic qualities of the text (Van Rees 1987). While individual reviewers assess works based on personal tastes and perspectives, these judgements are shaped by broader dynamics within the cultural field. The resulting collective alignment of opinions, which harmonise without a central coordinating authority, fosters the reproduction of value judgements across the literary field, often amplifying the perceived significance of a text.

For English-speaking critics, *The Evenings* was primarily discussed as a deeply humane and timely novel. They framed its universal relevance with statements like “In a time of increased divisions, recognizing the universal—even an impish, adolescent universal—in the unfamiliar is more important than ever” (Alberge 2016; Forbes 2016; Marchand 2017; Pruis 2017; Reith 2017, n.p.; Siegal 2017 express similar sentiments). In keeping with Pushkin's strategy of downplaying the novel's Dutch specificity, most reviewers emphasised the haunting atmosphere and the relatability of Frits van Egters as an everyman figure, while largely ignoring its setting in post-war Dutch society. When mentioned, the historical context was framed as “a provocative reminder that life goes on even in the bleakest of circumstances” (Haut 2017, n.p.).

In that respect, it is perhaps not surprising that this “cornerstone manqué of European literature” (Parks 2016, n.p.) and *The Observer’s*, *Financial Times’s*, and *The Irish Times’s* Book of the Year enjoyed a second wave of success in 2020, when the pandemic struck and Frits van Egters’s scenario of killing time became uncannily relatable. It turns out that what we needed in those ‘bleakest of circumstances’ was neither a sourdough starter nor our first ukulele; what we needed was, to recall Koch’s blurb, “the funniest, most exhilarating novel about boredom ever written” (Reve 2016).

## Conclusion

Drawing its structure and conceptual framework from van Es and Heilbron’s (2015) model of multilevel field analysis, this chapter investigated the English translation history of *De avond* across three levels. At the macro level, we examined Reve’s fraught exophonic relationship with English and its implications for the translation of his Dutch oeuvre, illustrating the broader challenges faced by peripheral authors seeking access to dominant literary markets. The meso-level analysis situated Reve and *De avond* within the Dutch, American, and British publishing fields, tracing the novel’s halting translation history across various publishing landscapes. This section highlighted the pivotal role of Pushkin Press, the small independent publishing house that eventually succeeded in publishing the English translation after several failed attempts by others. The micro-level analysis reconstructed the interpersonal and institutional dynamics shaping the ultimately successful translation project, focusing on key intermediaries such as Marijke Nagtegaal, foreign rights manager at De Bezige Bij, and Victor Schiferli, fiction grants manager at the DFL and Reve’s former editor at De Bezige Bij, both of whose efforts, often requiring careful, patient, and diplomatic mediation, were instrumental in overcoming barriers to the novel’s publication in English. Finally, we analysed the branding and reception of *The Evenings*, exploring how branding decisions by the publisher intersected with the discourses that emerged during the novel’s critical and popular Anglophone reception.

By integrating these perspectives, the chapter offered an extensive, multi-scalar account of how *De avond* overcame systemic hurdles to reach an Anglophone readership. The process was rarely straightforward, characterised instead by interruptions, false starts, and moments of contingency. Despite its immediate acclaim in the Netherlands and eventually elsewhere, the novel’s journey into English took nearly seventy years, a delay that reflects the structural and symbolic barriers faced by peripheral literatures and the idiosyncrasies and interactions of the book’s various advocates. The success of *The Evenings* highlights the critical role of strategic branding and cultural framing in the reception of translated

literature. Pushkin Press effectively positioned the novel as a universal and timely work, emphasising its dark humour, existential themes, and relatability, while downplaying its Dutch specificity. By aligning Gerard Reve with literary giants such as Salinger and Camus and leveraging his image as a pioneering LGBTQ+ writer, Pushkin bridged cultural gaps and reinforced the novel's literary prestige, helping to secure its place as both a cornerstone of modern European literature and a transnational artifact.

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### Notes

- 1 Among Low Countries publishers, in-house translation into English has been particularly prevalent in the genre of children's literature. Clavis, headquartered in Hasselt, and Lemniscaat, based in Rotterdam, both operate English-language imprints in New York. World Editions, the English-language imprint of De Geus, a Breda-turned-Amsterdam-based publisher specialising in works by immigrant and international authors, regularly translates titles from the De Geus catalogue into English.
- 2 This is the focus of the ERC Starting Grant project "Making Migrant Voices Heard through Literature: How Collaboration Is Changing the Cultural Field" (COLLAB, 2023–2028), led by Núria Codina Solà. Jack McMartin co-supervises the work package "The Impact of the Sharing Economy on New Publication Practices in Contexts of Migration."
- 3 All Dutch interview excerpts in the main text were translated to English by the authors. The original transcription for each excerpt is included in a corresponding footnote.
- 4 Ruwette (2008) rightly points out that the oft-mentioned big three characterisation is highly gendered and overlooks authors like Hella S. Haasse, whose position among the most acclaimed Dutch post-war writers is now uncontested but was much slower to emerge due to critics' perceptions of gender.
- 5 "Melancholia," a story about a young man in hiding during the Nazi occupation, was found to be "contrary to public order and the accepted principles of morality" (Huff 2019, n.p.). The print run was confiscated, and the Dutch deputy minister of education, arts, and sciences withdrew a travel grant awarded to Reve because he deemed his writing "immoral" (Huff 2019, n.p.). One reviewer who managed to find a copy wrote that it had "the honesty value of an opened toilet door, of the sick insipidity of an exhibitionist" (Huff 2019; see also Beekman and Meijer 1973, 61–66).
- 6 Interview conducted on May 21, 2021. Original text in Dutch: "Op een gegeven moment heeft Reve dus besloten dat hij niet meer wilde dat zijn werk vertaald zou worden, dus dat kwam omdat er gewoon slechte mensen daarmee aan de slag zijn gegaan met de beste bedoelingen maar met een *mediocre result*."

- 7 Interview conducted on May 15, 2022.
- 8 The first translation of *De avonden*, *Les soirs* (trans. Maddy Buysse), published by Gallimard, appeared in 1970, three years after the trial. It is possible that the scandal actually served to raise Reve's profile among foreign publishers partial to socially engaged, provocative writers.
- 9 Interview conducted on December 11, 2024. Original text in Dutch: "Hij had zelf ook een haat-liefde verhouding met zijn debuut. Hij ontwikkelde natuurlijk verder. Hij was met andere dingen op weg en uiteindelijk een hele andere schrijver geworden. En met die benauwde wereld van *De avonden* had hij zelf niet zoveel voeling meer mee. Dat rijmde niet met dat uitgesproken homoseksuele. Of dat stilistisch exuberante wat hij dan in latere boeken zou hebben. Dus misschien dacht hij ook een beetje van: 'Nou, dat hebben we gehad.'"
- 10 Since *De avonden* is classified by the DFL as a classic, translation publishers can apply for a grant that covers 100% of the translation costs.
- 11 Interview conducted on December 11, 2024. Original text in Dutch: "Op de toppen van mijn diplomatieke kunde heb ik dat proberen duidelijk te maken."
- 12 Interview conducted on December 22, 2024. Original text in Dutch: "Deze tekst schreeuwt maar om één naam: die van Sam Garrett."
- 13 Founded in 1997, Pushkin Press has significantly shaped the landscape of foreign literature in English translation, aiming to diversify the Anglophone book market. Since its acquisition by Freudenheim in 2012, the publisher has continued to introduce a wide range of international voices to Anglophone readers. Pushkin's first major success from Dutch literature came in 2014 with Laura Watkinson's 2013 translation of Tonke Dragt's *De brief voor de koning* (1962), *The Letter for the King*, later adapted into a Netflix series in 2020. This success bolstered international interest in Dutch literature and led to an increase in Dutch translations at Pushkin, of which Sam Garrett's translation of Reve's *The Evenings* (2016) and its follow-up *Childhood* (2019a) are part. Translations from Dutch currently constitute 10% of Pushkin's list. Other authors include Onno Blom, Peter Buwalda, Louis Couperus, Willem Frederik Hermans, J. S. Margot (English pseudonym of Margot Vanderstraeten), Eva Meijer, Erwin Mortier, Jeroen Olyslaegers, Annet Schaap, Annie M. G. Schmidt, Jan Jacob Slauerhoff, Jan Terlouw, Manon Uphoff, and Hilde Vandermeeren.
- 14 Interview conducted on December 11, 2024. Original text in Dutch: "En hij zei, had tegen mij gezegd: ik zoek vooral boeken die geschreven zijn in de late jaren 40, dus een beetje zo net na de oorlog. Die uitdrukking gaven aan dat gevoel van toen hè. Je had bijvoorbeeld [J. D.] Salinger, had je toen of, nou ja, in Duitsland dan [Heinrich] Böll en [Günther] Grass enzo. Dat is een beetje van die die je krijgt net na de oorlog. Daar zocht hij met name boeken van. En toen dacht ik: *De avonden!* En dat is misschien een andere manier dan dat je normaal gesproken gaat denken, hè, vanuit het aanbod: we hebben hier een klassieker, die is heel bekend. En ik speel [in tegenstelling tot hoe dat normaal verloopt bij klassiekers] nu heel erg in op een vraag die daar was: ik dacht nou, jaren 40, legendarisch boek. Dus ik vertelde, er is een legendarisch boek in Nederland. Ziet u? Dat is nog nooit vertaald in het Engels, maar het is natuurlijk ook dan, ja, dan kun je zo'n verhaal vertellen: het is een van de weinige boeken die altijd meer jaar in, jaar uit in druk blijven en er is een film van gemaakt en er zijn heel veel mensen die heel veel citaten uit hun hoofd kennen en het wordt gezien als een belangrijk boek uit de Nederlandse literatuur. En het is een interessante schrijver, ook met het levensverhaal. En nou ja, dan iemand kwam erop. [. . .] Daar is eigenlijk het zaadje gezaaid, bij een lunch,

- en dat ik nadacht over wat voor boeken hij zocht en ik dacht: ja, dit past daar precies in.”
- 15 Translations of *De avonden* have since been published in Swedish (2017), Croatian (2018d), Danish (2018a), Italian (2018c), Hebrew (2019b), and Turkish (2018b). However, only detailed qualitative research can determine the extent to which the English translation influenced these translation projects.
  - 16 In Dutch: “Toen had ik ook gelukkig een soort van wetenschap achter me dat wij die vertaling niet hoefden te nemen.”
  - 17 Nagtegaal may be referring to an article indirectly quoted in Huffels (2016) in which Garrett calls translating *De avonden* “een droomklus” (“a dream assignment”).
  - 18 Interview conducted on May 21, 2023. Original text in Dutch: “Ik wilde vanaf het begin Sam Garrett. Die is, dat is gewoon de allerbeste vertaler die ik ken, uh, zijn vertaling van Herman Koch is geroemd en [ . . . ] ja, omdat hij gewoon de beste is, wilde ik dat hij altijd fragmentvertalingen van mijn auteurs deed. Hij deed ook gewoon heel veel bij ons, gewoon omdat hij ook onze boeken goed vindt en ja, omdat we vooral hem waarden denk ik, en het is een hele aardige man. En ik had dus gelezen in een artikel, dat wist ik niet, maar dat artikel kan je misschien ergen vinden of heeft misschien Sam nog, dat 'ie heel graag, dat hij ooit nog wel eens graag *De avonden* zou vertalen en dat had ik in mijn hoofd zitten. Dus ik dacht van ‘nou, die wil ik’ en als hij niet kan dan moeten we maar verder kijken.”
  - 19 Interview conducted on May 15, 2022.
  - 20 Note that Koch is attached to several of *The Evenings*'s main intermediaries: Nagtegaal handled international rights for his international bestseller *Het diner* while working as a rights manager at Contact, and Garrett penned the English translation.

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